

DEEP WATERS: LIFE IN THE COAST GUARD



By Dhara Khothari

We call them the sea police or sea patrol. Lawbreakers call them the white elephant. They are the Indian Coast Guards. Established in 1976, the Indian Parliament passed the act for them on 1 February 1978, which is also Coast Guard Day. Although they are an offshoot of the Indian Navy, they are an independently working organization and man the Indian peninsula 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Some of the duties they perform are;

- Protection of offshore installations, from oil rigs to marine archaeology.
- Search & Rescue - to save lives & vessels, protect marine life and the environment.
- To supervise and conduct round-the-clock surveillance of India's waters up to 200 nautical miles into the sea (each nautical mile is 1.86 km)
- Assisting customs and the Directorate of Revenue in apprehending smugglers at sea, or to stop any illegal activities along India's watery border (prior to 1976, smuggling was caught by the land police and customs).

Vessels plying on Indian waters are cleared by the Coast Guard and are to report at least twice a day to the nearest Coast Guard vessel giving their position which is logged and maintained. This is only for safety but is like an indirect check on the crew and work done, as there are possibilities of illegal immigrations, smuggling or unlawful activities being carried out.

Initially, gold & electronic goods were on top of this list. Then came narcotics. Today it's arms & ammunitions. "All we do is assist the custom officials in this regard. Once on land, it is their headache," says Deputy Cmdt. Navdeep Bakshi, adding that "we act upon the information supplied to us, for we have our fleet spread throughout the coastal waters surrounding the country."

Every Coast Guard vessel, irrespective of its size, is given a specific area at sea to be covered. These ships are constantly on the move in their given area. Besides the usual duties, they also conduct various tests like checking the pollution level and marine life. There are also a number of smaller duties such as helping any boats lost at sea, warning any other vessels during bad weather, offering help needed by any of the other defense services during exercises, arms tests or in any scientific experiments. Life for Coast Guards is responsible. They are systematic and orderly.

Their day begins at the crack of dawn at 6 a.m. From 6:30 - 7 a.m. is exercise time. 7:00 - 7:30 a.m. is time to clean their cabins and the ship (one probably learns this in scouts/guides). From 7:30 - 8:30 a.m. they bathe and have breakfast. Work begins at 8:30 a.m. From 10:30 - 10:45 a.m. is a tea break and lunch is from 12:30 - 1:40 pm, after which it is back to work. At about 3:30 p.m. work ends.

If the ship is at shore the Officers are free to go home, except for at least two Officers who stay back for night duty till the next day. Every Officer gets a turn, depending on how many there are in the ship. Paper work is something that cannot be avoided by any government organization and even the Coast Guard have to finish theirs. If the ship is at sea, at 3:30 pm they complete their unfinished paperwork, supervise, or relax. They have indoor games, library, TV with all channels, music, etc.

DEEP WATERS: LIFE IN THE COAST GUARD

By Dhara Khosla

One call from the sea police or sea patrol. Lawbreakers call from the white elephant. They are the Indian Coast Guards. Established in 1978, the Indian Parliament passed the act for them on 7 February 1978, which is also Coast Guard Day. Although they are an offshoot of the Indian Navy, they are an independently working organization and man the Indian coastline 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

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The little time they can spare, they simply sleep. All this is routine which is done when not saving a life or arresting criminals. If, during their surveillance, they land at another port, the officers and workers take the opportunity to visit the city or town after 3:30 p.m. This way they can tour the entire coastal India, including our islands. Duty calls the Coast Guards to be on their toes at all times. It takes about four hours to be ready to move out to sea upon receiving a tip, distress call or information. "If we have to leave suddenly after office hours, we call all our Officers at once," explains Deputy Commandant Bakshi, who is now assigned to work on land. "Those who are contacted and arrive leave immediately, including the Captain."

But will a life or a vessel that sends an SOS wait for the Officers to be contacted, arrive and leave to come to their rescue? Or will the criminals wait patiently for the Coast Guard to come and arrest them? "That's not the case," says Deputy Commandant Bakshi. "As a rule, any vessel that is closest to the victim, has to answer the call for rescue irrespective of the origin or purpose of that ship. No matter where we are, it takes time to reach the scene, hence this universal law which is bound on anyone out at sea."

"And in any case, a number of our ships are always moving and covering a given area of the sea. Also, we have interceptor boats and crafts which are sent in advance for they are much faster than our ships. In a real emergency we have the helicopter, which is the fastest mode of transport. We will also be acquiring a fleet of hovercraft shortly to assist us further." Ask about the lives they have saved, and these Officers humbly shrug their shoulders saying, "It's all in a day." Says Assistant Commander Anurag Kaushik, "I joined the CGS *Sangram* in November 1997 and till date we have saved 17 lives."

The Coast Guard vessels can be distinguished from Navy vessels because they are white in colour, while Naval vessels are gray. The Coast Guards have different kinds of vessels. They are Advanced/Simple Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPV), Fast Patrol Vessels (FPV), Inshore Patrol Vessels (IPV) and Interceptor Boats (IB). Only the OPVs have decks for helicopter landing. An Advanced OPV such as the CGS *Sangram* has accommodation facility for two helicopters on deck. They have a gunnery storage facility below deck and on the deck is the 76mm gun which can be used against vessels and aircraft.

Besides, there is a bridge two storeys above the deck along with which are the communication rooms which are auto and manual control. Below is the captain's cabin and a couple of senior Officers' cabins. On the deck floor is a ward room which is, in local terms, an entertainment or smoke room. Here Officers gather to relax, watch TV, listen to music. Alongside, there are a few more cabins for senior officers.

Below the deck level are the quarters of junior Officers, two Officers per tiny cabin. Below this is a whole new section which includes on one side the engine and electrical rooms and the other side the kitchen, dining rooms, library, workers common room including their sleeping arrangement, etc. This is one floor where civilian women are not allowed, only women Officers. On deck, outside in the open, are smaller lifeboats and long boats for safety measures. This ship, CGS *Sangram*, also has a mini-plant where ordinary water can be converted into fresh water. The power is supplied through its own generators when at sea. Once near the land they prefer using the power from the land source.

It is a self-contained vessel that can last on sea for days. But they would rather not stay for more than 30 days because the provisions of fresh food and water have limitations. Advanced vessels like these have the capacity for more than 20 Officers plus numerous assistants and workers. Big vessels, such as Advanced OPVs, have specialized Officers to take care of each department. Besides the Captain, there are General Duty Officers such as the Commanding Officer assisted by Executive Officers or the 2nd-in-Command.

Then there are Electrical Officers, Engineering Officers, Medical Officers (they also have an

operation theatre where minor surgeries can be performed), other Executive Officers like the Navigation Officer, Logistics Officer, Signal Communication Officer, Pollution Control Officer, Nuclear Biological Chemical Damage (NBCD) Control Officer and Flight Commanders. Under these Executive Officers are Deputies or Assistants.

For smaller ships the facilities are less, therefore less Officers are needed. Those on vessels perform multiple duties. Example: A Signal Officer can also act as a Navigation Officer. All ships have access to Interceptor Crafts which are fast on water. These crafts make it easier to save lives or catch criminals. The Coast Guard is one of the few organizations that are constantly updating their methods, fleet and equipment. Communication is also of an advanced level. As explained earlier, the bridge has sophisticated equipment giving the latest information about anything and everything.

They are unlike the land police in all respects. "We have the best and most intense training the country could give," says Deputy Commandant Bakshi proudly. The selection and training is similar to that of the Navy. The pay-scale and perks are incentive-based, encouraging and take care of officers and workers. Life is an adventure and for those of you who love to live life with a touch of danger, risk and still come out a winner, then the Coast Guard is for you. "I had a chance of being selected in both the Navy and the Coastguards," says Assistant Commander Kaushik, who is the Day Officer of CGS *Sangram*, "but I chose the latter because I was aware of the life the Navy and the Coastguards lived."

"Today I am very happy with my decision, so also is my family. I am an assistant commander at a young age. If I were in the Navy, it would have taken me several more years to be in this post. This is one big advantage here, that you are handed a responsible and big post based on your experience, not age," he adds.

There are four kinds of entries into this field;

- General Duty Officers - Executive category or Deck Officers
- Technical Officers - Mechanical Engineers trained to be Marine Engineers
- Lady Officers - the first badge came in 1996; these are for the law and supply cadres
- Direct Commercial Pilot License (CPL) holders - for women and men

The basic and advancement training is given along with Naval Officers. Exams are conducted every January and June for which the forms are filled six months previously. The following address is where you can write to for enquiries on forms:

*Regional Recruitment Officer,
Coastguards Regional Headquarters (West),
Golfadevi Temple Road,
Prabhadevi PO,
Worli, Bombay - 400025*

The exams are held in two phases.

Phase I - a preliminary selection board tests candidates in IQ, GK and interviews held at three to four places all over the country (usually Bombay, Delhi, Chennai and Port Blair). The candidate should be HSC passed, in science and a graduate in arts, commerce or science. For lady Officers, graduation in any faculty.

Phase II - Once passing through Phase I, there is a final selection in New Delhi. Here they give their exams in IQ, GK and science. If they qualify they go through interviews and medical examinations. A merit list is formed and as per the vacancies they are called. "A person can keep applying till the age limit is crossed," says Deputy Commandant Bakshi.

On selection they are called cadets and are put through the capsule or orientation course at

Goa along with Naval Officers for approximately five months. Once through with the course, they are training officers and are transferred all over the country depending on their specialization. For example, technical guys will go to either CGS *Shivaji* at Lonavala (engineering only) or at INS *Vulsara* at Jamnagar (electrical). The CPL holders go for helicopters or fixed wings. These Officers go in for further training at INS *Rajali* (60km off Madras) and the fixed wings come to Daman at Coast Guard training. The lady Officers are sent to INS *Hamla* in Bombay.

The General Duties - For Phase I training, the Officers are sent to the Coast Guard ship, CGS *Varuna*, an OPV, for a 4½ month capsule. Here they learn all about practical drills. Phase II training - For four weeks they are put on ships of smaller class, FPV and IPV.

Phase III training - on an advanced OPV for five months. Here these officers are given various portfolios to handle which is an exam called seamanship board. After this they are put through Sub-Lieutenant technical courses. They learn a little about everything. The next stop is INS *Hamla* for six weeks of logistics in which during the last two weeks they are taught computers.

In brief, the training course would look as under:

- INS *Shivaji* - 1 week on ship engineering
- Safna, Cochin - 1 week on aviation
- Cochin - 6 weeks on gunnery
- Signal school - 4 weeks about communications
- Signal school - 1 week about seamanship
- Cochin - 1 week about diving
- Navigation school - 6 weeks about navigation & direction
- SMWT - 3 weeks about war
- ASW school - 2 weeks about anti-submarine warfare
- ASW school - 3 weeks about sea labs
- ASW school - 1 week about fishery
- Coast Guard ship - 1 week about ocean management & pollution response
- Law school - 4 weeks about custom & marine laws

After a break they spend 24 weeks or 6 months as watch keepers. Then they are tested and earn a ticket. After this, a student becomes a full-fledged Officer. The whole process takes almost two years. Technical Officers, after training, are put in ships as Deputy Engineering / Electrical Officers directly under the commander. They are posted either on shore or at sea.

Besides the canteen facility, accommodation has been give to at least 90% of the coastguard employees, be it an Officer or a worker, even though it is not part of the service. Travel for Officers is once a year, for immediate family once in two years, and four years for all dependents, anywhere in the country. This, plus extremely nominal charges for the houses, messes owned by defense all over the country & state and circuit houses for staying when on tour.

Loan facilities are provided at much less than market rates. Specialized educational grants and scholarships for self, spouse and children. Preference in order of merit given to children for same career. Six month maternity leave with pay to female Officers and 19 days paternity leave to male Officers. And here's the best perk - 20% in cash of the value of what's caught is divided as 10% to the informer or agency and 10% to the rest, those who helped in catching the illegal goods be it gold, electronics, narcotics, arms, etc.

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