

There are now 500 active duty members, 105 reserve members, 29 civilians and 890 auxiliary on the North Coast. On these waters, Coasties are best known for enforcing fishery laws, repairing aids to navigation and — perhaps their most valued mission — performing search and rescue operations.

Astoria's proximity to the Columbia River makes it a favorable location for centralizing Coast Guard activities. Among the 11 river bars in Sector Columbia River, the wide Columbia River Bar has the most consistent surf and the most areas to practice water rescues and airlifts, Capt. Daniel Travers, the sector commander, said.

"This has just some of the best weather for training Coasties that you can possibly imagine," he said.

And — unlike members of Department of Defense services, who must often wait for war to break out before putting their training into practice — "we live our mission every day," he said. "I don't have to pray for it to happen; it's just there all the time."

Blending in

Out of uniform, Coasties tend to blend into the community. "We become part of the fabric of Astoria," Travers said.

"Most Coast Guard units count on the community for their lifestyle," said Mark Dobney, a retired warrant boatswain who rejoined the service as a full-time civilian controller in the



USCG HH-60J Jayhawk helicopter: On the tarmac at Air Station Astoria. — ALEX PAJANAS PHOTO

air station command center. "We use local doctors, local hospitals or medical services for our families, if not for ourselves, and it depends on what's available."

Whereas Defense Department military services have self-contained bases with commerce exchanges and medical facilities, Coast Guard units are generally too small to justify the same sprawling infrastructure.

Though the Coast Guard has an exchange at West Marine Drive with uniforms available and limited grocery options, Coasties are more likely to shop at area retailers. And though many service members live in government-owned housing units behind Tapiola Park, many choose to lodge in regular residences.

"Coast Guard people and families live off of what's around, and they enjoy and support local businesses," Dobney said.

Little things have helped Astoria grow, and the Coast Guard's integration with the community is one of them. If, say, five new Coast Guard families arrive in town, "that's five more incomes that are coming into the community,"

he said. "Those little growths, which are behind the scenes, really do help the community,"

'We love the Coast Guard'

Former Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen takes offense, however, when anyone tells him how lucky the city is to have the Coast Guard payroll boosting the economy — as if service members' spending habits signified their greatest contribution.

"That's such an insult. That irritates me so deeply because the men and women (of the Coast Guard) are willing to risk their lives to save our lives, or to save our property," he said. "The payroll is nice; that is the last thing on my mind. Astoria's just a better place to live in because of the Coast Guard."

Though the city, almost without exception, embraces the Coast Guard, Astoria, for many service members, is still a two-to-three-year adventure en route to the next one.

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