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A Changing Climate
A shifting Arctic strategy



Historical Snapshot

The NASBLA BOAT Program

A decade of safety

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This is the story of a revolution—one that radically changed the way the United States safeguards its people on the water. Furthermore, this really is one of those stories where two people, who happen to be experts in their field, sit down in a restaurant to solve a

national security challenge bedeviling them both. These two colleagues, who will become close friends before this all plays out, decide right there to put their reputations and careers on the line for their vision.

Here's how the revolution happened.



NASBLA's instructors draw on their experience, knowledge, and skills to make the BOAT Program a success. Photo courtesy of Will Plumas

The History

From the perspective of the United States Coast Guard, 2001–2010 was eventful. In that window, America suffered the most devastating terror attack ever against our homeland, the deadliest and costliest hurricane to hit our shores in 75 years, and the largest marine oil spill in history. Through it all, the Coast Guard was hard at work on implementing a solution to the problem these events kept demonstrating was unavoidable. The Coast Guard would forever struggle to have enough boats on the water to handle grand-scale catastrophes; unless it had help. Ten years ago, that help began to manifest in the form of one of the greatest innovations in the modern history of maritime response, the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) Boat Operations and Training (BOAT) Program.

In October of 2009, NASBLA held its very first BOAT course. This was the first quantifiable step toward getting more boats on the water to help handle a major event. The key here is that the additional boats on the water after that first class graduated were not Coast Guard boats. They were boats drawn from state, local, and tribal agencies, whose crews were now trained to a Coast Guard standard, from tactics to vocabulary.

On the 10th anniversary of that first NASBLA BOAT course, it is worth examining what happened then, what happened since, and where we are now.



Students and instructors share a break and provide feedback between underway exercises. Photo by Mark Farmer of Farmboy Photos

The Run-Up

Back in the heightened security environment that followed September 11, 2001, the Coast Guard concluded it would have to train local partners to assist in the task of escorting liquefied natural gas carriers into Boston Harbor. “We learned the tactics they employ [outside of the continental United States] OCONUS. We all realized that these tactics needed to be changed to those INCONUS tactics, as we were pointing M60s into the apartment building windows of East Boston,” Dave Considine, then a boatswain’s mate in the Coast Guard’s Boston Harbor Defense Team, said. “We have been using those tactics in our Tactical Operator Course ever since.”

The “ever since” began unfolding quickly, when the Coast Guard took the training from Massachusetts to New York and Maine. This got Admiral Vivien Crea’s attention. Impressed with the tactical cooperation between agencies, she suggested it could be a workable program for the entire East Coast. Florida soon embraced Admiral Crea’s vision, when Florida Fish and Wildlife’s then-Captain Brad Williams helped create a training template that laid the groundwork for a national program of standardized training, typing, and credentialing across diverse enforcement agencies.

Early in 2002, NASBLA assembled a Council of Partners, pulling subject matter experts from every corner of the maritime law enforcement and response

community. While the formation of the Council of Partners had been a reaction to the terror attacks the year before, it was Hurricane Katrina in 2005 that pressed the point. By the time Katrina’s deadly floodwaters rolled back, her greatest lesson had left a lasting impression: Going forward, the Coast Guard needed state and local help with every major event, and that help would have to be trained to a common standard. Years later, the Council of Partners determined the training standard emerging on the East Coast was the solution they were looking for. In 2008, Maine Marine Patrol Major John Fetterman, Maine’s boating law administrator, realized NASBLA was uniquely poised to oversee such a boat program.

In Fetterman’s vision, NASBLA would help local units identify the kind of training they needed and help them find the grant money to acquire the training, allowing them to become the Coast Guard’s force multipliers in disaster response. Fetterman believed NASBLA could leverage not only its history of positive partnership with the Coast Guard, but, even more importantly, its vaunted countrywide network.

While serving as NASBLA’s president that same year, Fetterman met Jeff Wheeler, the deputy chief of the Coast Guard’s Office of Boat Forces. During his work with the Council of Partners, Wheeler had helped set the stage for Fetterman’s concept of single-standard universal training and force multiplication. The men found they shared

an identical vision for Coast Guard units training with state and local agencies from across the country and becoming a unified force. That's when the two colleagues went to dinner to solve this once and for all.

Before they left the restaurant, Wheeler and Fetterman had mapped out the way forward. Wheeler would tell his bosses that, based on the initial trials he'd seen in Florida and Maine, he was confident that NASBLA could deliver the Coast Guard's standard. Furthermore, and here was the big ask, Wheeler was going to convince the Coast Guard's admirals to gift the Coast Guard's official boat operations manual to NASBLA to build the single national standard of training.

Fetterman, now NASBLA's deputy executive director, recalls that meeting well. "NASBLA's BOAT Program would not exist had it not been for Jeff Wheeler," Fetterman said. "Jeff is the guy who put his entire reputation and career on the line by supporting my crazy idea. Jeff had the vision and confidence in his new friends, and he was as sure as I was that this was the right place, the right time, and the right partnership."

It wasn't without risk. Fetterman confesses the stakes were daunting for both of them. "We looked at each other, realizing that we had everything on the line with regards to our credibility, our reputations, and our careers. That's when Jeff looked at me and said, 'Don't muck this up!' followed by his characteristic smile and barely audible laugh. Laugh or not—I knew he meant it!"

The Tactical Operator's Course

Florida enforcement personnel participated in the NASBLA BOAT Program's first Tactical Operator's Course (TOC) in Miami, in October 2009. It was followed by a joint Coast Guard and sheriff's department course in Charleston, South Carolina, the next month.

For five mornings, students learned tactics from videos and blocks of instruction in the classroom. Afternoons were outside on the water, putting the good lessons to use in actual speed scenarios. There was a team spirit in the classes, despite the fact students often hailed from different agencies. In years ahead, federal grant money, including new boat procurement, would actually be tied to NASBLA BOAT Program certification, a national credential that would be recognized and used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The Coast Guard was so satisfied with the training, it occasionally sent its own members through the TOC. More importantly, for the first time, state and local agencies were trained and qualified in useful maritime skills and their certifications were searchable in the national database so neighboring governments and federal authorities could tap the skilled units when needed.

Those earliest classes in 2009 set the pattern. No matter who made up the class, the students studied together, eager to get on the same page. Sooner or later, they understood they would have to react to a threat from the hurricane, a chemical spill, or terrorists hell-bent



Students get underway in the afternoon to apply the morning's lessons in actual speed scenarios. Photo by Mark Farmer of Farmboy Photos



Students from multiple agencies learn the same national standard of training and build partnerships at the same time. Coast Guard photo

on blowing up the cruise ship. And they would have to work alongside other agencies using identical tactics and vocabulary to get the job done.

The Official Watersheds

On May 11, 2012, not three years after that first TOC, VADM Brian M. Salerno signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Coast Guard and NASBLA's CEO John M. Johnson. The pivotal line read:

The USCG hereby establishes the NASBLA Boat Operations and Training (BOAT) Program as the National Standard for the purpose of training and credentialing state, local, county and tribal maritime law enforcement officers and rescue personnel.

In the eyes of John Fetterman, that MOU was a long-awaited validation. "No matter how good of an idea, it would have taken just one misstep for the Coast Guard and the states to turn their backs on the program," he said. "We avoided the missteps, and the MOU meant that the partnership, concept, and delivery was proven."

With that signing, VADM Salerno had officially provided every boat forces unit in the Coast Guard an invaluable resource in the form of partners they could call on for any role. This was indeed a victory, and

interagency cooperation increased exponentially in the wake of the MOU. It would be five years of the Coast Guard and NASBLAs working with FEMA to develop the qualifications and resource typing for waterborne response professionals before the next breakthrough occurred.

On November 7, 2017, FEMA announced it had finalized its overhaul of the resource management component of the National Incident Management System (NIMS). As FEMA put it, typing of maritime position qualifications and resources would "greatly enhance the response to maritime incidents, and allow for Incident Commanders to more adequately request personnel and resources through the National Mutual Aid System and the Emergency Management Assistance Compact."

The upshot, between the MOU and the FEMA typing, was that the Coast Guard's original dream of force multiplication by way of activating maritime partners in other agencies was no longer a dream, but the new reality. This represented the hardening of one of the biggest maritime response assets in our nation's arsenal in measurable terms of boats and trained human capital. Fetterman looked back at those watershed events in amazement. "To this day, Jeff and I look at each other with great pride

for making the impossible happen,” he said in 2019.

The Instructors

If we’re going to call out the program’s milestones, it’s even more important that we highlight the element that has kept the BOAT Program energized every step of the way, and that is the instructors. Nearly all those with knowledge of the program cite the instructors as the key. If you hope to train capable boat professionals in the finer tactics of maritime response, you need to be an elite expert in your field. Though the instructors do possess that expertise, it is in their dedication and enthusiasm for the program that make NASBLA’s instructors truly stand out.

Dave Considine, former member of the Coast Guard’s Boston Harbor Defense Team in the wake of the September 11 attack, and now director of the NASBLA BOAT Program, takes particular satisfaction in his instructor corps. “The past strength and success of the BOAT Program is directly attributable to the knowledge, experience, and skills of our instructor cadre,” he said.

Retired Texas Game Warden William J. “Will” Plumas’s introduction to the NASBLA BOAT Program came in 2011, when he went through the TOC in Corpus Christi as a student. “I’d been working what we called border operations on the Rio Grande, and not everything we got in the course applied exactly to riverine environments, but what I learned was that doesn’t matter. Good tactics are good tactics,” he said.

The following year, Plumas was tapped to be an assistant instructor, and has since worked his way up to lead instructor and the program manager for NASBLA Airboat Operations. More than eight years after he was

a student in a TOC class, his belief in the program hasn’t waned. “We do each other a great service when we’re willing to pass along our life long experiences to the new generation of maritime first responders,” Plumas said.

Sergeant Keith Matthews of the San Francisco Police Department’s Marine Unit is another student-turned-instructor. He said watching students’ confidence and skills increase makes him as proud as hearing about the improved relations between other governmental agencies and Coast Guard operators. “[They] can then rely on each other to conduct the mission using the same tactics—that’s what makes me proud and drives me forward as an instructor,” he said.

“NASBLA’s instructors come from diverse agencies all around the country, with broad, differing backgrounds,” said TOC Instructor/Connecticut Environmental Conservation Police Captain Eric Lundin. “When we come together to teach a class, all are singly committed to that course’s objectives and mission: To have the students become valuable assets in their particular maritime community.”

The Program Today

In the 10 years following the first TOC, the NASBLA BOAT Program issued more than 17,000 official certifications to maritime law enforcement and first responders. To comprehend the effect those certifications have on our nation’s readiness, consider that the number is double the number of boat crew personnel in the active duty Coast Guard. During the most recent program year, 2018–2019, more classes—97—were completed and more students graduated than any of the previous nine years. In the first year of the program, there were 15 instructors for a single

course offering. Now there are 230 NASBLA instructors teaching four FEMA-recognized courses among more than 20 distinct NASBLA BOAT Program courses offered.

What the NASBLA BOAT Program has done for our national readiness is dramatic. Participants in the program understand they are part of a national response team, linchpins in the security, and protection of our country as a whole. And the Coast Guard has come to recognize and call on these same agencies as partners with the same interests and stakes. For the past decade, while many governmental entities have been discussing and planning, the NASBLA BOAT Program has been producing tangible real-world gains against our



Florida Fish and Wildlife officer escorts a nuclear submarine near U.S. Naval Station Mayport. National Association of State Boating Law Administrators photo

nation's crisis preparedness.

The Dividend: Real World Ops

Retired Major Brad Williams, Florida state law enforcement, now the National Tactical Program manager and lead instructor for the NASBLA BOAT Program has personally witnessed many of those gains. This includes the Florida Waterborne Response Teams (WRTs) who engaged in multi-year escort missions protecting nuclear submarines transiting in and out of U.S. Naval Station Mayport in Jacksonville (the original operational plan for Station Mayport ran through 2012, and the escorts continue to be scheduled case-by-case at various ports along the east coast of Florida). The frequency of the escorts had strained the limits of the local Coast Guard Station, leading the Coast Guard and the Navy to tap the Florida WRTs, credentialed graduates of the BOAT Program courses, to handle the sensitive assignment. "They ran like clockwork," said Williams, who was Florida's statewide coordinator for the missions. "And this freed up the Coast Guard to continue its important search and rescue and law enforcement duties."

As commanding officer of Coast Guard Station Castle Hill in Newport, Rhode Island, Chief Warrant Officer (Ret) Tom Guthlein also experienced the dividends of the NASBLA BOAT Program in his area of responsibility. "The fire and police side is being used to help supplement the Coast Guard's response," he said. "The Providence Strike Team requires its members to complete the Boat Operator Search and Rescue Course for two reasons. First, it makes every member interchangeable, no matter what kind of official title they have or what kind of boat they're on. Second, it means they can react right away, as soon as they arrive on the scene."

A compelling example of these principles played out on Mount Hope Bay, when a boat caught fire and four passengers wound up in the water. "Four boats responded. There was East Providence Fire on the scene, and Warwick Fire," Guthlein said. "And then there were two smaller boats, the Portsmouth Fire Department and Bristol Fire Department. One boat dealt with the fire and the other three immediately launched sector searches, and they recovered all four people."

Some of the rescuers were recent graduates of the Boat Operator Search and Rescue Course, and they




Florida Fish and Wildlife personnel fire a warning shot in Jacksonville. National Association of State Boating Law Administrators photo

credited the program's having given them the tactics they employed to rescue the survivors from the water.

The Future

When a revolution succeeds as boldly as the NASBLA BOAT Program has, looking back at its rise is instructive, but there is also value in peeking ahead. To determine where the revolution is aiming next, we turn to the two individuals John Fetterman refers to as "the trustees" of the program, Dave Considine and Brad Williams, who know better than anyone not just where the program came from, but where it is headed.

For Considine, the future starts with the instructors. "As our more seasoned instructors begin to rotate out of the program, we must have highly capable instructors ready and capable of filling that void," he said. "We see a bright future in the continued expansion of maritime related courses we will be able to deliver."

Lead Instructor Brad Williams frames his own optimism about the program's future in succinct language befitting the veteran maritime responder he is. "The sea state is ever changing," he said. "It challenges us with every swell. NASBLA BOAT is uniquely capable of rising to the challenges." 

About the author:

Ames Holbrook writes for the U.S. Coast Guard's Office of Boat Forces, and is the author of multiple books, including *DISCHARGE: A Veteran's Lessons on Outrunning the Pentagon, Moving Stolen Military Art, and Guzzling Civilian Freedom*.