



# FLOT Lines

Flotilla 74, Brandon

Southeast District

USCG Auxiliary

Issue 1 2026





# FLOT Lines

Newsletter Flotilla 74, Brandon  
Matthew Stephen, Flotilla Commander  
Brett Skaggs, Flotilla Vice Commander  
Meeting: Second Tuesday of each month at 7:00 p.m.  
3006 South Kings Ave., Brandon, Florida

## Flotilla Staff Officers

**Tanner Piliego**  
Information Systems

**Vishrut Amin**  
Communication Services

**Earl Abbott**  
Finance

**Christopher Hunt**  
Communications

**Toshiya Arciaga**  
Member Training

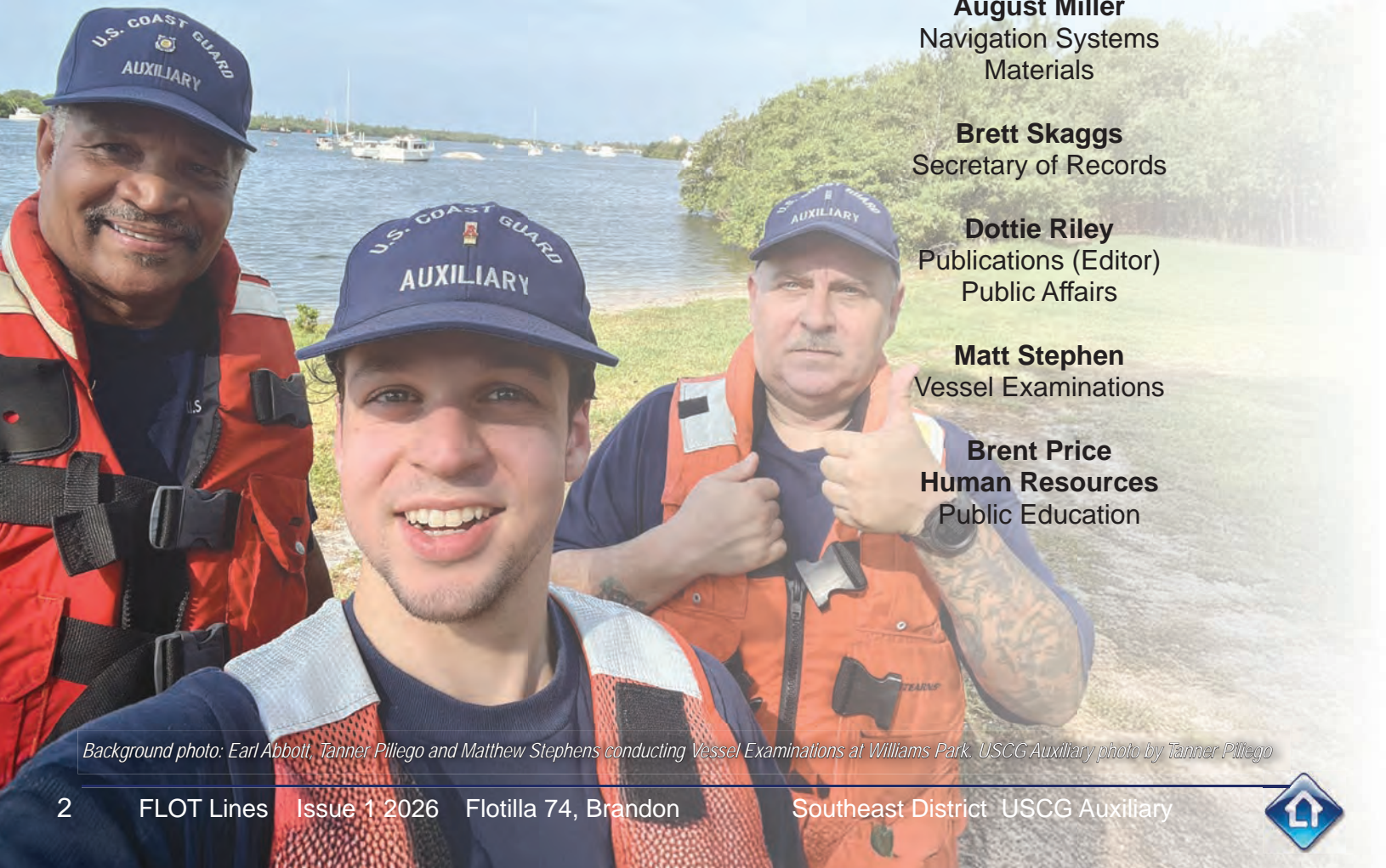
**August Miller**  
Navigation Systems  
Materials

**Brett Skaggs**  
Secretary of Records

**Dottie Riley**  
Publications (Editor)  
Public Affairs

**Matt Stephen**  
Vessel Examinations

**Brent Price**  
Human Resources  
Public Education



Background photo: Earl Abbott, Tanner Piliego and Matthew Stephens conducting Vessel Examinations at Williams Park. USCG Auxiliary photo by Tanner Piliego



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*We're on the web!*



[www.cgaux74.org](http://www.cgaux74.org)



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Flotilla74/>

*Cover photo: Davis Island boat ramp with Tampa in the background. Photo by Dorothy Riley*

*A dolphin surfaces near a channel marker in Tampa Bay. USCG Auxiliary photo by George Papabeis*



# From the Helm



**Matthew Stephen**  
Flotilla Commander

## Flotilla Update – A Strong Start to the Year

We are off to a strong and promising start this year. With four qualified instructors, we are fully prepared to begin offering boating safety classes to the public. Last month, Brent Price and I taught a ‘Stop the Bleed’ course, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. We have already received a request to

teach the class to other flotillas, and we plan to schedule that session soon.

We are also proud to welcome three new members who achieved Basically Qualified (BQ) status in record time. Their enthusiasm and dedication set a great example for all of us.

In addition to our boating safety classes, we will hold weekly member training sessions to support anyone who needs help with Moodle, PQSs, or other training needs. Details about these opportunities—and much

more—can always be found on our flotilla website: <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=070-07-04>

As we move forward, let’s all strive to make this year even better than the last. The Auxiliary offers countless opportunities to learn new skills, contribute to meaningful missions, and find your purpose within our organization.

It is important to acknowledge that a small group of dedicated members consistently carry much of the workload. Their commitment keeps our flotilla active and afloat. At the same time, many members have stepped back or become inactive, and we genuinely want to understand how we can bring you back into the fold.

What can we do to re-engage you?

What would help revive your motivation to participate?

Your experiences, your ideas, and your presence matter. We sincerely welcome your feedback and look forward to hearing from you. Ω



*Corey Case assists in a towing exercise training mission with Coast Guard Station St. Petersburg on Feb. 15, 2026. USCG Auxiliary photo by Matthew Stephen.*



# From the Helm

Wow, it's been an exciting first quarter of 2026. In January, Dottie Riley, Vishrut Amin, and I attended the St. Andrew's Touch-A-Truck event in Brandon. Thanks to Vish, Flotilla Staff Officer - Communication Services, for fielding calls from the church and signing us up for this event. We displayed Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons (EPIRB) and hands-on knot tying for the kids, while the flotilla also brought coloring books, stickers, bracelets, and tote bags. This was a small event, but a great way to see the community early in the year. August Miller, our Flotilla Staff Officer-Materials, placed an order for additional coloring books for the next event. Hopefully, these will arrive for the Sun-N-Fun event in April.

As finances were reconciled, we were able to complete the disenrollment process for three members who had not responded to the yearly dues request. We also identified one member who should have been disenrolled last year, but the help desk did not complete the disenrollment. This means the flotilla will not cover the division costs for members who are not current.

While it's sad to see members leave, we also want to share that three members joined this year, and all became Basically Qualified (BQ) within 30 days. This wouldn't be possible without the commitment from Toshiya Arciaga, our Flotilla Staff Officer -Member Training, paving the way for them. Flotilla 74 also has a pending member application at DIRAUX, Brent Price, Matthew Stephen, and I are working through the Human Resources prospect list of ten potential candidates. So far, this is shaping up to be a strong year. Ω



**Brett Skaggs**  
Flotilla Vice Commander



January



February



March

*January: Brett Skaggs, Flotilla Vice Commander, administers the oath of office to August Miller, Vishrut Amin, and Toshiya Arciaga at the Jan. 13 business meeting.*

*February: Matthew Lajom Gensen takes his new member oath at the February meeting.*

*March: Eric Bartlett is sworn in as a new member by Matthew Stephen at the flotilla meeting on March 10, 2026. USCG Auxiliary photos by Dorothy Riley and Haylee Skaggs.*



## Flotilla 74, Brandon Members Participate in

# TOUCH-A-TRUCK

By Dorothy Riley



Flotilla 74, Brandon, had a wonderful time at the Touch-a-Truck event hosted by St. Andrews United Methodist Church on January 24, 2025. Members Brett Skagg, Vishrut Amin, and Dorothy Riley, along with Brett Skagg's daughter, Alexa, came together to set up and welcome families to a day full of fun and learning. With over 300 attendees, the Auxiliary booth was a popular stop—kids loved picking up coloring books, stickers, and whistles designed just for them.

Touch-a-Truck was all about hands-on exploration. Children were thrilled to climb aboard and honk the horns of emergency, construction, and service vehicles. The event was free for families and included sensory-friendly hours, so everyone could enjoy the excitement of sirens and horns in a comfortable setting. Even when the fire truck and county ambulance had to leave for a real emergency, the joy and laughter continued, making it a memorable day for all.

A special shout-out to Charisse Jones, Communications Director for St. Andrews UMC, who organized the event and made our flotilla feel welcome. ★



*Photo captions on following page.*





*Captions for previous page, top down:  
Alexa Skaggs, Brett Skaggs, and Vishrut Amin staffed the Public Information booth at Touch-a-Tuck held at St. Andrews United Methodist Church in Brandon on Jan. 24. An estimated 300 people stopped by the booth.*

*Vishrut Amin helps a small girl select a coloring book. The children stopping by were offered coloring books, whistles, and stickers.*

*Brett Skaggs, Alexa Skaggs, Dorothy Riley, and Vishrut Amin pose for a group photo in the Public Affairs information booth.*

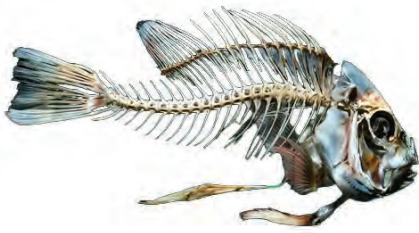
*Vishrut Amin and Alexa Skaggs visit the Hillsborough County Rescue ambulance.*

*This page from the top, left to right:  
Children and their parents wait to climb into the Hillsborough County Recycling waste truck. The truck was a big hit at the Touch-a-Tuck event for children and the children within the older participants.*

*Vishrut Amin's inner child took a turn sitting in the driver's seat of the Hillsborough County Recycling waste truck and blowing its horn.*

*The Hillsborough County Rescue ambulance displays the equipment stored inside. USCG Auxiliary photos by Alexa Skaggs and Dorothy Riley.*

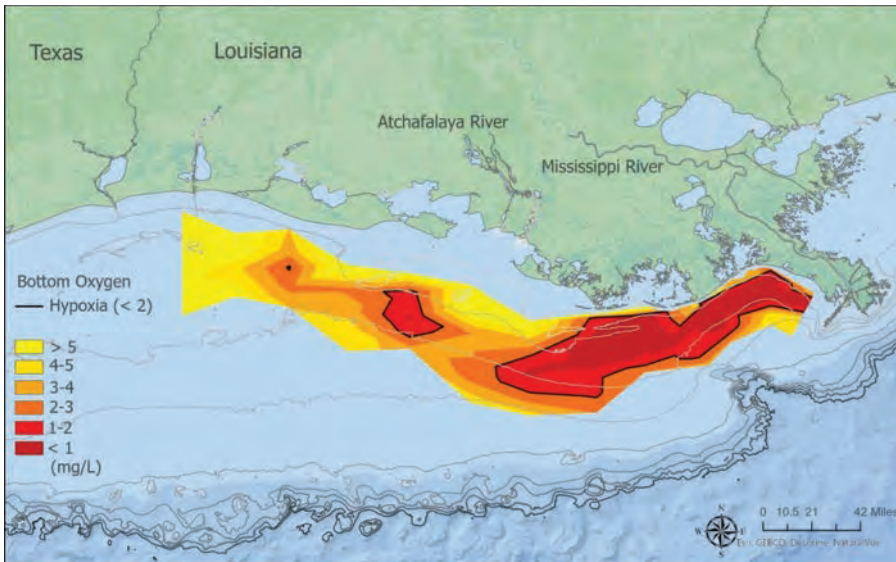




## The Dead Zone:

*What is it and how does it effect us?*

By Dorothy Riley



The Gulf of America dead zone is where nutrient pollution—primarily nitrogen and phosphorus—flows along the Mississippi River from various sources (such as lawns, sewage treatment plants, and farmland). These nutrients trigger excessive algae growth in the water.

As these algal blooms thrive, they consume oxygen, leading to severe depletion of oxygen in the water. This lack of oxygen makes it incredibly challenging for marine life to survive in the affected zone<sup>1</sup>.

Heavy rains and melting snow carry these nutrients downstream into the Gulf. Once there, the nutrients fuel algae blooms, which ultimately deplete oxygen. The consequences are significant: not only does this harm marine ecosystems, but it also affects seafood production and tourism. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimates that the dead zone costs the U.S. seafood and tourism industries around \$82 million annually. Louisiana, known for its seafood, is particularly impacted, as more than 40% of the nation's seafood comes from the Gulf of America.

The dead zone's size varies from year to year. During the summer of 2018, it was approximately the size of Delaware. However, it's essential to recognize that even smaller dead zones remain a severe problem. Despite occasional variations due to factors such as wind patterns, the underlying issue—nutrient runoff from the Mississippi River—continues to contribute to large dead zones.

Organizations like "The Nature Conservancy" are actively working to mitigate the impact of the dead zone. Strategies include promoting efficient fertilizer use among farmers, reconnecting rivers to floodplains (which

helps filter excess nutrients), and advocating for legislation that protects natural resources.

It is crucial to recognize the interconnectedness of the Mississippi River, its tributaries, and the Gulf. Collaborative efforts are necessary to find solutions that benefit both people and nature. So, while the Gulf of America dead zone presents significant challenges, ongoing efforts exist to address it.

Read more about the Gulf of America Dead Zone -

The Nature Conservancy. <https://www.nature.org/en-us/about-us/where-we-work/priority-landscapes/gulf-of-mexico/stories-in-the-gulf-of-mexico/gulf-of-mexico-dead-zone/>.

Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico - National Oceanic and Atmospheric .... <https://oceantoday.noaa.gov/deadzonegulf/welcome.html/>.

Dead Zone - National Geographic Society. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/dead-zone/>. Ω



# Articles of Interest

## The Lifeline on Paper: Why a Float Plan is Your Best Friend at Sea.

By Vishrut Amin

Whether you are heading out for a morning of fishing in Tampa Bay or a weekend cruise down the Intracoastal, every boater shares one common goal: returning home safely.

While we often focus on checking the fuel, the weather, and our tackle, there is one piece of “equipment” that is more important than a GPS but costs absolutely nothing: a Float Plan.

### A.) What is a Float Plan?

A float plan is a simple document that summarizes your trip’s details. It isn’t for you; it’s for the person you leave behind on land. It tells them where you are going, who is with you, and, most importantly, when and where to call for HELP.

### B.) Why It Matters to the Coast Guard?

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) does not actively track recreational vessels. If you lose power or your radio fails, they won’t know you’re missing unless someone sounds the alarm.

If a loved one calls the USCG Sector St. Petersburg because you are overdue, the first thing the Command Center will ask for is a description of your vessel and your intended route. If you’ve left a float plan with a “Holding Person,” that information can be relayed in seconds, turning a “needle in a haystack” search into a “targeted” rescue mission.

### C.) If Someone is Overdue: What to Do?

If you are the person holding a float plan and the boater has not returned by the “No Later Than” (NLT) time, do not hesitate:

- 1.) Call the Coast Guard immediately: Reach out

to the Sector St. Petersburg 24-Hour Command Center at 866-881-1392.

- 2.) Have the plan in hand: Be ready to read off the vessel’s registration, the number of people on board, and their planned destination.

- 3.) Check the ramp: If possible, confirm if the boater’s vehicle and trailer are still at the marina or boat ramp.

### D.) If someone who was reported has returned: What to do?

Important Reminder: If the boater returns safely or your plans change, notify the Coast Guard immediately to cancel the alert and prevent the unnecessary deployment of rescue resources.

E.) As a boater, always close your plan. As soon as you are safely back at the dock or home, call your contact person to let them know you’ve arrived. This prevents “False Alerts,” which can pull rescue crews away from real emergencies.

Visit the Division7 webpage for info: <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=070-07>

Float Plan - <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=070-07&category=boater-links>

The image shows a digital form titled "FLOAT PLAN" from the USCG. It is divided into several sections: "VESSEL IDENTIFICATION" (Name, Registration No., Year, Make & Model, Length, Hull & Trim Colors, Prominent Features), "COMMUNICATION" (Radio Call Sign, DSC MMSI, Radio-1/2 Type, Ch. / Freq. Monitored, Cell / Satellite, Email), "PROPELSION" (Primary/Auxiliary Type, Fuel Capacity), "SAFETY & SURVIVAL" (Visual and Audible Distress Signals, EPIRB, UHF, Additional Gear like Anchor, Dewatering device, Exposure suits, Fire Extinguisher, Flarelight, Searchlight, Raft, Dinghy, Food/Water for days/person), "PERSONS ONBOARD" (Operator Name, Address, City, State, Zip Code, Age, Gender, PFD, FLE UIN, Home Phone, Experience with vessel, Home Phone, Vehicle License No., Trailer, Vehicle parked at), and "PASSENGERS / CREW" (Table with columns for Name, Home Phone, Age, Gender, PFD, Note, and Passenger FLE UIN). The form also includes instructions and a note about EPIRB and FLE UIN registration.



## Gasparilla 2026:

# Inclement Weather Changes Auxiliary Involvement in Annual Gasparilla Boat Parade.

By Dorothy Riley

Too cold. Too windy, and more bad weather predicted. With that in mind, on Thursday, January 29, the Coast Guard asked the Auxiliary to shift from underway operations in support of the Gasparilla marine event to providing Auxiliarists at boat ramps to advise boaters of the changed parade route and the severe weather conditions.

Lacking any hard data on which ramps are used for Gasparilla, we selected ramps based on distance to the event and typical weekend usage. Members were asked to serve at selected ramps from 9:30 to 11:30 A.M. on January 31, the day of the parade.

Eleven volunteers came forward, and coverage was set up for seven boat ramps. Many of our members do not own winter outerwear for their ODUs. By sharing and being flexible, we were able to manage. Dorothy Riley was one of the volunteers who warned boaters at the Williams Park boat ramp, along with Dennis Smith from Flotilla 77, Polk County. All the Gasparilla boat ramp team was provided

- Script to use with boaters, including revised Gasparilla route map.
- Detailed color-coded hourly weather forecast of winds, temperature, and rain.
- Press release about Gasparilla route changes, safety zone, etc.



Due to the weather, turnout for Gasparilla by recreational boaters was light. Volunteers at the Williams Park boat ramp interacted with 17 vessels. One decided to abort. Two departed and quickly returned. Fourteen launched for Gasparilla after being advised about the route change and weather conditions.

In addition to volunteering at boat ramps, several Auxiliarists assisted with radio communications for vessels participating in the parade. Christopher Hunt assisted in radio communications from the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office location at Sparkman Channel.

Yes, this year was different, but we adapted. Ω

*Top: Dorothy Riley volunteers to warn boaters about the wind and weather on Jan 31, at the Williams Park boat ramp for the annual Gasparilla boat parade. USCG Auxiliary photo by Dennis Smith.*



*Bottom: Christopher Hunt (looking up) assists in setting up the auxiliary antenna at the command communications center at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office for the Gasparilla boat parade. USCG Auxiliary photo.*



# Articles of Interest



## **Diver Profile:** **Matthew Stephen, Master Scuba Diver**

By Dorothy Riley

Matthew Stephen has been an active diver since 1992, building more than three decades of experience beneath the surface. His dedication to training and safety has earned him the distinguished Master Scuba Diver rating through the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI)- a level achieved by a small percentage of recreational divers and recognized as the highest non-professional rating in the PADI system.

To qualify for this certification, a diver must complete the Rescue Diver course and successfully finish five specialty certifications, demonstrating both advanced skill and a commitment to continued learning. Matt completed the following specialties on his path to Master Scuba Diver:

- Equipment Specialist
- Boat Diver
- Emergency Oxygen Provider
- PADI AWARE
- Underwater Navigator

Matt's pursuit of excellence doesn't stop there. He is currently working toward his Public Safety Diver certification, expanding his capabilities into the demanding world of emergency response and specialized underwater operations.

His long-standing dedication to the diving community reflects both passion and professionalism, and we look forward to seeing him continue to advance in this challenging and rewarding field. Ω



*Matthew Stephen poses Scott Lucci, with his diving instructor, after receiving the Master Scuba Diver rating. Photo provided by Matthew Stephen.*

*(Image of Matthew in diving gear is AI generated by Microsoft Copilot.)*



# Articles of Interest

## Honorary Member Chooses Coast Guard as Career Path

By Brett Skaggs

In 2025, Haylee Skaggs was sworn in as an Honorary Member of Flotilla 74, Brandon. After graduating from high school early, she chose the military as a career path. After speaking with the US Air Force and the US Coast Guard, Haylee decided the Coast Guard was a great way to give back while also learning valuable skills and pursuing a career in Maritime Law Enforcement. I was honored by Matthew Stephen, Flotilla Commander, to present my daughter, Haylee, with her last Flotilla Achievement Award for her dedication and contributions to the success of Flotilla 74 during her honorary membership from 2025 to 2026.

Special thanks to Anthony Hooper, Division Commander, and all of Flotilla 74 for attending Haylee's last flotilla meeting before her departure to Cape May Boot Camp on April 14.

Haylee has used the flotilla to learn about the USCG and its core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty, alongside previous Flotilla 74 members Ethan McKenzie and Vy Pham, who have joined the United States Coast Guard on active duty.

As we are sad to see Haylee no longer attend our meetings, we wish her the very best in her future endeavors and look forward to the updates she provides to share with the flotilla. As Weather Tite Mike says in his commercials, "Don't Forget To Bring The Cookies" next time you attend our flotilla meeting.

Good Luck, Best Wishes, With Love,  
Your Dad and Flotilla Vice Commander,  
Brett Skaggs



*Anthony Hooper, Division Commander, and Brett Skaggs present a Certificate of Appreciation on March 10 to Haylee Skaggs, an honorary member of Flotilla 74, Brandon. In addition to her cheerful, helpful attitude, Haylee volunteered countless hours to the success of the flotilla (and she bakes great cookies too). USCG Auxiliary photo by Dorothy Riley.*



# Articles of Interest



## Flotilla 74, Brandon offers STOP THE BLEED® COURSE.

Members Matthew Stephen and Brent Price conducted the American College of Surgeons STOP THE BLEED® course on Jan. 27 at Flotilla 74, Brandon.

Uncontrolled bleeding is the number one cause of preventable death after an injury. Whether it's a car accident, a household mishap, or a public emergency, the person closest to the scene is the one most likely to save a life.

The STOP THE BLEED® course offers hands-on skills to step in when seconds count. It's simple, it's powerful, and anyone can learn it. Attendees master the use of tourniquets and wound packing, and how to turn fear into action during an emergency. Photos provided by Matthew Stephen.



# Staff Officer Reports

## Vishrut Amin: Communication Services

I have created a centralized version of our shared drive that can be used only by staff members. Staff Officers can use it to upload photos or documents.

To access it, go to the Flotilla 74 Brandon website and log in with your credentials. After logging in, navigate to “Members’ Only,” then “Administration,” to find the blue box image.

(Note: You’ll not see the “Administration” tab under “Members’ Only” if you are NOT logged in.)

Attached is the link to our website” <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=070-07-04&category=administration>



ers and those currently training to become Vessel Examiners. The VE Workshop presentation and attestation are located at the National V-Directorate website (in the Member Zone): <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=V-DEPT&category=member-training>.

The PV Workshop is recommended for all certified Program Visitors and those currently training to become Program Visitors.

The PV Workshop presentation and attestation are located at the National V-Directorate website (in the Member Zone): <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=V-DEPT&category=member-training>.

Members must submit a Workshop Attestation Form to Tanner Piliago, Flotilla Staff Officer-Information Services (FSO-IS) for entry into AUXDATA II (this form is in the same location as the VE and PV Workshop presentations listed above). Note: When adding the VE Workshop task to Activity Logs in AUXDATA II use the task named “Vessel Examinations Workshop” in the Workshops task category list. When adding the PV Workshop task to Activity Logs in AUXDATA II use the task name “RBS Program Visitor Workshop (WK-16)” in the Workshops task category list.

## Tanner Piliago: Information Systems

Tanner has entered all hours submitted. Please keep your hours up to date. Let him know if you need assistance.

## Toshiya Arciaga: Member Training



*Training and Workshops can be located on the Training Directorate website: <https://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=T-DEPT&category=training-innovation>. (Image created using AI)*

The 2026 National Vessel Examiner (VE) and Program Visitor (PV) Workshops are not required but recommended to be completed in 2026. They are designed to be viewed by members and comple-

tion logged via a self-attestation form as described below:

The VE Workshop is for all certified Vessel Examin-

## August Miller: Materials

August has submitted a request for additional coloring books and materials for children and youth. These are the materials we exhaust most frequently.

## Dorothy Riley: Publications

I need staff officers to copy their reports to me for inclusion in the newsletter. Reports for the previous month should be completed and submitted to the flotilla vice commander by the staff officer meeting on the first Tuesday of every month.

My deepest appreciation to the members who regularly submit photos and articles to our newsletter. Ω



# Meeting News



*January 13, 2026*

*Left: Anthony Hooper, Division Comander, presents Goerge Humphreys his first Auxiliary Sustained Service Award.*

*Right: Anthony Hooper, Division Comander, presents Vishrut Amin and Toshiya Arciaga Division 7 Staff Officer Appointment certificates. USCG Auxiliary photos by Dorothy Riley*



*February 10, 2026*

*Left: Brett Skaggs administers the new member oath to Matthew Lajom Gensen at the February meeting. USCG Auxiliary photo by Dorothy Riley.*

*Right: Vishrut Amin attended the boating safety course at Flotilla 75, Apollo Beach in February. USCG Auxiliary photo by Vishrut Amin*



*Jan. 31, 2026*

*Left: Matthew Stephen and Lt. Showers, a pilot from Clearwater Air Station seated outside the communications command center.*

*Right: March 10, 2026 Matthew Stephen, Flotilla Commander, administers the new member oath to Eric Bartlett. USCG Auxiliary photo by Dorothy Riley*



WE WANT YOU TO BE A  
**DEDICATED VOLUNTEER**  
IN THE U.S. COAST GUARD AUXILIARY



Find out how you can become  
a member at:  
<http://join.cgaux.org/index.php>

Or call: 1-813-444-3845

USCGA-P-1

FLOT is a military acronym meaning "forward line of own troops." FLOT line or "forward edge of battle area" (FEBA) are technical terms used by all branches of the U.S. armed services to designate the forward most friendly maritime or land forces on the battlefield at a given point in time during an armed conflict.

We are not a military force engaged in armed conflict. We are, however, the front-line of the struggle to save the lives of recreational boaters, and we face this great endeavor armed with Vessel Safety Checks, Public Education classes and all the other Recreational Boating Safety programs in our arsenal. Our newsletter banner serves as a reminder of this mission.

*FLOT Lines* is a publication of Flotilla 74, Brandon, Southeast District United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, located at 3006 S. Kings Ave., Brandon. The Auxiliary an organization of dues-paying unpaid, civilian volunteers whose mission is to assist the U.S. Coast Guard in promoting boating safety. Articles may be reprinted with the express consent of the author or photographer with proper credit given to same. For permissions or for more information, please contact the editor, Dorothy Riley, SO-PB, Email address: [dottieriley@gmail.com](mailto:dottieriley@gmail.com)

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Be sure to attend flotilla meetings  
*When:* 2nd Tuesday, 7 p.m.  
*Where:* Flotilla 74, Brandon  
3006 S. KINGS AVE, Brandon, FL  
*Why:* Membership is more rewarding  
when you participate-  
*and bring a friend!*