

Police marine beat not just a place to cool heels: Police marine duty no...

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Police marine beat not just a place to cool heels

By Anthony DeBartolo

Not far off the Gold Coast and Streeterville's shore, the city's "navy" is on patrol. From April through the first week of December, the Chicago Police Department's six-boat, 60-member marine unit serves and protects its watery jurisdiction—three miles into the lake from Howard Street on the north to Calumet Harbor on the south, and the Chicago and Calumet Rivers.

Waterway patrols and lake rescue operations began in 1929, when policing the water beat

was the park district's responsibility, says Patrolman Len Labiak, sitting at the wheel of M-4, a 42-foot, 18-ton aluminum-hulled cruiser capable of 23 miles an hour.

The police and fire departments jointly took over the detail in 1959. "Until 1972, there was a fireman and policeman on every boat. The forces separated, and we've had the duty ever since," says Labiak, a 19-year police force veteran, and marine member the last 11.

"The Coast Guard has been pulling back their operation, giving us more and more respon-

sibility. But we team together for boat-to-helicopter transfers," he says.

Two years ago, the marine unit took over the old Coast Guard station on the lake near Monroe Street as its headquarters, but maintains its former Navy Pier digs to store the fleet when ice tops off the harbors.

"During the winter we're assigned our furloughs. When we come back, we beef up other units until March when everybody goes back to school for three weeks," Labiak says.

Though each of the unit's boats, ranging in size from 32 to

45 feet, has a general area of lakeshore to patrol, "we don't have beats so much here; we generally go where we're needed," he says.

Labiak's own twin 300 horsepower diesel craft stays centrally located, cruising the shore and harbors between the Adler Planetarium and North Avenue. It is the main dive boat, with at least two crewmen at any given time being department-trained divers. The boat carries a minimum crew of three.

The M-4 doesn't patrol the river "because of the time it takes going through the locks—

about 10 minutes," Labiak says.

Patrolman Bob Hehl, a 10-year force veteran and one of three divers assigned to M-4, joined the unit four years ago because he "just wanted a change in assignment."

"Here, it's more of a service as opposed to enforcement. People are happy to see us. I worked traffic, and no one was happy to see me when I stopped him on the expressway," he says.

Another M-4 diver, Patrolman Ray Mazzola, a 12-year veteran who spent his first 4 years on the street and the last 8 on, and

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Tribune photo by John Bentley

A crew of the Chicago Police Department's M-4 takes a break from lake patrol with a stop at a mooring just south of Navy Pier. The patrolmen are [from left] Bob Hehl, Len Labiak and James Meador.

Police marine duty no picnic

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under the water, "joined for a change—got tired of the street, that's all."

What do the crew's landlocked counterparts think of the cool breezes and panoramic views of the summertime floating assignment?

Despite the rigorous training and testing each marine member goes through, Labiak says, "every year, we'll get new guys on board, replacements due to attrition, who signed up just because they thought it was an attractive detail. Then they'll hit their first storm, with 6- to 8-foot waves, and we won't see them again."

Though the M-4's crew spends much of its time aiding distressed boaters caught in sudden squalls or adrift due to engine failure, safeguarding the harbors from burglary and vandalism is another big responsibility. The job also can be grim: recovering victims of drownings, small-plane crashes and suicides.

"There are as many violations possible on a boat as in a car, so there's police work out here too," Labiak says.

Tickets—sea blue ones as chance would have it—are given to boaters not properly equip-

ped; who endanger other craft by careless driving or speeding in the harbors; or who threaten the safety of swimmers. And every month, like every other city patrolman, the marine patrolmen spend a day testifying in Traffic Court, 321 N. LaSalle St.

"You give a guy in a 45-foot boat a ticket, they'll run into some funny attitudes. A lot of them get indignant. You'll go to court and they'll be there with a high-priced attorney—it's gets funny sometimes," Mazzola says.

M-4, painted the department's familiar blue and white, is equipped with red flashing lights, a horn and siren, public address system and radar, having an effective range of 26 miles.

It also has five radio bands to monitor: weather, police city-wide, car to car, fire and marine.

"We'll get distress calls from someone who'll say, 'I don't know where I'm at, but I can see Sears Tower.' You can see that tower from almost everywhere, so we have a radio direction finder. It traces the source of their radio signal," Labiak says.

Other equipment on board includes a reversible pump, used to put out fires as well as pump out sinking ships. Life preservers, blankets, first-aid kits, re-

suscitators, stretchers, ropes and axes are tightly packed into the bow and cabin. The cabin itself is furnished simply with a single padded bench and a small table where crew members keep the log and write incident reports.

The only weapons on board are the officers' service revolvers, though some crew members say a torpedo would come in handy on occasion. Neither gun nor star is worn on board, and a dark blue jumpsuit fills in for the uniform.

"If you lose your star, you're docked a day's pay through suspension. If you lose your gun, you buy a new one. Because of the nature of the work, the department doesn't require we wear them on the boat, but when we're on shore, we put the gun on," Labiak explains.

High-rise dwellers along the Gold Coast often are helpful, spotting trouble at sea from their 40-story scanning towers.

"We'll get a lot of calls from people who've seen a capsized boat with their telescopes... or they'll report someone hitting the break wall at Oak Street, which happens a lot; it's hard to see... We really appreciate their help," Mazzola says.