

Civil Air Patrol acts as 'eyes in the sky'



Submitted photo by Maj. Brenda Reed Capt. Pat Aaron of the Carroll Composite Squadron flies the Civil Air Patrol aircraft over the Chesapeake Bay during recent Bay Patrol missions.

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Civil Air Patrol acts as 'eyes in the sky' By Maj. Brenda A. Reed, Civil Air Patrol

Distressed boaters, oil spills, threats to Maryland's bridges - all are events that could occur in the Chesapeake Bay on any given summer weekend. Monitoring these potential situations as Maryland's "eyes in the skies" is the Civil Air Patrol. Each summer trained pilots and aircrews fly over the bay from morning until evening observing, reporting, and ready to assist. Members of the Carroll Composite Squadron, headquartered in Westminster, were on patrol over the Fourth of July weekend. Crews left in the morning for Martin State Airport, where they established mission base with the duty officers manning the radios that would communicate with the CAP aircraft in the air, the Coast Guard and the Department of Natural Resources. The pilot for the day, Capt. Pat Aaron of Westminster, conducted his preflight check of the aircraft and briefed the crew. Each flight crew included a mission observer and a mission scanner. Shortly afterward, the plane and its crew were in the air over the waters of the Chesapeake Bay. Following an established flight plan, Aaron and his crew would fly several sorties covering the majority of the bay from the northern end to St. Mary's County, including Annapolis and Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Along the way, the crew would scan the waters in search of anything out of the ordinary.

Regularly established checkpoints keep the duty officer aware of their location. Any significant observations are radioed to the duty officer, who keeps a detailed log of the events of the mission. When needed, the duty officer will call the appropriate authorities.

Up in the air, crews are on the lookout for anything that could be a potential problem. Excessive smoke from one boat was noticed and after circling around the craft it was determined to not be an issue.

During one series of sorties that weekend, CAP crews alerted the Department of Natural Resources of a small oil spill. While this could be as minor as a boater illegally dumping fuel, it could also be a sign of a submerged boat and thus requires investigation. Later in the day, CAP aircrews were requested by the U.S. Coast Guard to investigate a distressed boater whose craft was taking on water. Provided with coordinates and a description of the location as given by the boaters, Aaron and his crew deviated from their regular patrol path to assist in locating the reported incident. In this instance the Coast Guard was able to successfully find the boaters with CAP's assistance.

CAP members from the Carroll Composite Squadron trained year-round to assist in Bay Patrol missions and any other missions tasked by the state or the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. CAP, in its role as the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, performs 90 percent of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as tasked by the center. Last fiscal year, Maryland Wing members flew 42 search and rescue missions and were credited with 31 finds.

The Bay Patrol missions are part of Maryland Wing's missions tasked by the Maryland Emergency Management Agency and conducted annually from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

The Carroll Composite Squadron has one of the largest trained aircrews available in Maryland. Regular classroom sessions along with simulated training exercises help keep these members' skills honed and ready to serve. Not all aircrew members are pilots. In fact, the majority of the aircrews are non-pilots, who serve as observers and scanners, assisting with radios and searching while the pilot flies the plane.

During the Bay Patrol missions during the holiday weekend, experienced crew members helped train newer members in critical skills that may help one day save a life.

Members aged 18 or over are eligible to serve as aircrews. Training is provided at the squadron headquarters in the Carroll Non Profit Center in Westminster, with the air portion of the training occurring in the squadron's Cessna 172 housed at Carroll County Regional Airport. Members also can train as mission base staff and radio operators while others train as ground team personnel - teams that go on foot into the search area to investigate clues.

Typical CAP missions include search and rescue for downed aircraft, missing-person searches and crash site surveillance. Aircrews also participate in homeland security missions such as aerial photography, monitoring critical infrastructures such as bridges and dams after flooding situations or tasking outside the state of Maryland.

This past spring Aaron and crews from around Maryland flew to Rhode Island for several days to provide assistance with flooding that occurred in the state.

The holiday weekend mission ended with no major issues occurring - all was safe on the Chesapeake Bay for the day.

Editor's note: Maj. Brenda A. Reed is commander of the Carroll Composite Squadron.