

Always wanted to fly, but can't afford it...
The Coast Guard Auxiliary can get you in the Air!

Another article in the Homeland Security & the Maritime Nation Series
(A two-part story)

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I always was interested in flying.

From the early days of my childhood, I'd watch on TV shows like *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers* (the original series; in re-runs – I'm not *that* old!). I'd also watch shows like the *Thunderbirds* and *Fireball XL5* (those marionettes of the future) or war movies like *12 O'Clock High* or *Wings of Eagles*.

Whether they were flying a space ship or B17, I was always fascinated. But flying was expensive. The only person I knew who was a pilot was a neighbor who worked for the airlines, and a rather well-off uncle, who was a lawyer.

Growing up by the water in Brooklyn, New York, everyone had boats, while still expensive, they for the most part didn't compare to the costs involved in owning a plane. So, I learned to sail and run a powerboat.

Then, I join the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary. I knew the Coast Guard (and the Auxiliary) did boating (that wasn't rocket science), and I also knew the Coast Guard had an air wing, since Coast Guard Air Station Brooklyn was just a hop, skip and a jump from where I grew up. But it never really clicked that the Auxiliary had an air wing, and that I could participate.

Several months ago, it clicked. So I went about finding out what I needed to do, in order to join Auxiliary Aviation. Here's what I found I could do, as a non-pilot. I could either be an Observer or a member of the Air Crew.

Observers and Air Crew both share the same initial requirements (you need to be an Observer first, before you can become Air Crew. But before I share what you need to accomplish (besides joining the Coast Guard Auxiliary, which requires you to be at least 17 years old, and be a US Citizen), let me describe what these jobs entail.

Air Observer: This program was implemented to aid the Pilot in observing all activity and traffic — both air and waterborne. In addition, the Observer will Keep track of all locations at all times. The Observer acts as the scribe for the mission, logging all times relating to the mission (such as radio checks, position reports, observations of record or importance).

A major function of the Observer is to maintain communications with Coast Guard and/or Auxiliary radio networks. Thus communications and observations are the key duties of this person.

Air Crew: This program was created to provide the pilot with a capable assistant that could provide the pilot during heavy workloads with a trained individual, capable of providing weather gathering and recording, radio communications, navigation in both visual and metrological conditions and visual and instrument approaches to airports.

Essentially, the Air Crew member would perform under the guidance of the pilot, much of what a co-pilot would do, with a major difference being that the Air Crew member is NOT a pilot (this doesn't mean the person who is acting in the Air Crew position is not a pilot, but they are not permitted to function as a Coast Guard Auxiliary pilot).

Training and Requirements

You would think the training and requirements to be an Observer would be steep. Just look at what you're responsible for, communications, record keeping and observing (remember, you have to know what you are looking at). In all actuality, becoming qualified for Observer is not all that hard.

Step 1. You need to study several manuals and pass an exam which is given on-line. The exam comes right out of the manuals, and while it may seem the questions are tricky, they aren't – if you read the material.

Step 2. You need to hook up with an Aviation section of your District and perform a minimum of 10 hours of flight time. In addition, you will eventually need to take water survival training, emergency egress training and a swim test, as well as any workshops required by the Coast Guard or Auxiliary. You'll have to purchase a Nomex military flight suit, and suitable footwear (boots), as well as some other small items.

Step 3. During your training flight time, you will have to show the Pilot(s) that you are capable of performing the duties of an Air Observer. Upon both their signatures and other required signatures, you will be designated an Air Observer.

What did becoming an Air Observer cost in real dollars? About \$275! The break-out was approximately \$100 for both my flight suit (I bought a new one, because finding a used one in my size is difficult) and boots, \$20 for required patches, \$7 for a sectional chart, and I'm sure another couple of bucks for out-of-pocket items.

Training and requirements for Air Crew, however add multiple dimensions to what you've already learned.

Step 1. One of the first requirements is passing another exam, called the Pilot Exam (even though you're not a pilot, you still need to know the rules and policies). Again, if you study, you will pass.

Step 2. A medical is required. You need to take preferably a FAA Third Class Medical (or appropriate substitute). This would be the same exam required if you were going for your pilot's license. The Coast Guard just wants to know that you are basically healthy.

Step 3. You've probably already done this, by taking the water survival and swim test, as well as emergency egress training.

Step 4. You'll need to either take an Auxiliary Communications Course or show proficiency in communicating with both CG Stations and Auxiliary vessels.

Step 5. Ground training is where you learn all about air craft communication systems and air traffic communications. You also learn about air navigation, and the electronics used in aircraft.

Aircraft are limited to where they can fly, so you need to understand airspace, charts and approach plates, and weather. Like many sports, planning a flight is extremely important. You need to know where you are, where you want to go, how you will get there, how much fuel you use, what the weather will be like, and is any other traffic (airplanes) going to be in your way. Upon successful demonstration of these skills you can move on to air training.

Step 6. Air training consists of practicing what you did on the ground, in the air. The pilot will permit you to perform those functions that you learned, and if properly demonstrated, will sign you off on those skill sets.

As with the Observer qualification, once you've obtained all the required sign-offs, and the paperwork gets processed, you are issued you Air Crew Wings (Observer's are not permitted to wear wings).

The only cost here may be your medical, otherwise there are no other out-of-pocket expenses.

So for \$275 I can now fly for the Coast Guard Auxiliary. Do something I always wanted, and serve my community, and my nation, all at once.

I call that a bargain!

For more information on the Coast Guard (www.uscg.mil) or the Coast Guard Auxiliary (www.cgaux.org) contact your local Coast Guard unit. For more information on Auxiliary Air Wings in your neck of the woods, check out:

In our next article, what its like to live through the training..

PHOTOS

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/aviator.jpg>

Auxiliary Air Aviator Wings (Pilots only)

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/air-crew-wings.jpg>

Auxiliary Air Crew Wings (not for Air Observers)

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/airfield.jpg>

CGAux Air Facilities on the ramp with a CG C-130 at CGAS Sacramento.

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/swimmer.jpg>

Auxiliarist fulfilling the swim test requirement (fully clothed and shod)

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/waterlogged.jpg>

Auxiliarist emptying water from her boot, after swim test

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/mcnabb.jpg>

Betty Wood McNabb a legendary Auxiliary and Civil Air Patrol pilot. She flew missions until she was 82 and was one of the first women to join the Auxiliary with her father, mother, and husband in 1940 in Florida; her brother enlisted in the active duty Coast Guard during World War II.

<http://www.freeportflotilla1306.org/press/aviation/auxairinaction.jpg>

Auxiliary Air Facility (plane) supporting a CG Patrol Boat & CG Auxiliary Facility.