

## Free Vessel Safety Check for Your Boat

By Keith Wohltman, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 95

MARCO ISLAND, FL – Borrowing a line from Jimmy Buffett’s song, *A Sailor’s Christmas*, “...the waterfront is reveling, the season has begun...”, we are approaching the start of “Season” on Marco Island. Within a few days the snowbirds will return, and our quiet little island will bustle with visitors from all over looking to enjoy our waterways. They will pursue their adventures on a myriad of vessels from paddle boards and kayaks to personal watercraft (PWC), sailboats to cruisers and pontoon boats to backwater skiffs. Many of these vessels have been sitting on lifts or in marinas since their owners left Marco last spring.



*Flotilla 95 Vessel Examiner, John Moyer, checks the expiration date on a hand-held flare during a Vessel Safety Check.  
Photo by Keith Wohltman*

Most will require some form of maintenance to get them ready for use. We encourage all of them to take advantage of the Coast Guard Auxiliary’s **FREE** Vessel Safety Check (VSC).

The VSCs are done by certified vessel examiners on a standard inspection form. The form covers mandatory requirements such as;

- State registration documents
- Proper display of identification numbers on the hull
- Personal floatation devices
- Visual distress signals (flares)
- Fire extinguishers
- A sound producing device
- Navigation lights
- Gasoline powered boats with enclosed engines must have ventilation systems and backfire flame control devices.

The form also covers recommended safety items such as;

- VHF radios
- Dewatering devices
- Anchor and line

- First aid kit
- GPS.

The inspectors will also engage in discussions with the boat's owner for additional items depending on the type of boating activities they plan to pursue. They might even suggest taking a safe boating class to a novice boat owner or one unfamiliar with the waterways around Marco Island.

An inspection will typically take from 15 to 30 minutes to complete, depending on the size of your boat.

If all mandatory inspection items are in order, the examiner awards a safety inspection decal, which is then affixed to the port or left side of the vessel nearest the helm. The inspection decal is valid from the date of issuance through December 31<sup>st</sup> for the year printed on the decal. If any deficiencies are detected no decal is awarded. However, these deficiencies should be corrected to ensure the boater has the necessary equipment to enjoy a safe and pleasurable boating experience. Once the items are fixed or replaced, an examiner will return and complete the vessel safety inspection and issue the decal.

A VSC does not verify the vessel owner's boating experience level or training and it does not certify the mechanical or electrical condition of the vessel. It does provide the boat owner with the knowledge that they are in compliance with the boating safety requirements and that in an emergency they will have the necessary equipment to save lives and summon help.

Flotilla 95's Staff Officer for Vessel Examination, John Moyer, has been asked many times, "Will the decal prevent me from being stopped by law enforcement marine units, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FWC) compliance officers, or the US Coast Guard?" "No", is the simple answer. However, it will provide a visual indicator that the boat owner sought an inspection to check their vessel.

If you had your boat, kayak or PWC inspected last year or the year previous, do you need to get it checked this year? Absolutely! Some of the items on the checklist have expiration dates, like hand-held flares. As boat owners we sometimes forget the exact expiration date but that will be reviewed during the inspection. This is the number one item for not passing the VSC and one that is simple to resolve. If your flares are outdated, or soon to expire, the examiner will notify you of that deficiency and suggest you purchase new flares. Vessel registration expiration is another place where the VSC will remind you to renew. This year, our inspectors will also be looking more closely at the fire extinguishers on your boat as Kiddie Fire Extinguishers have had a major recall this year. The inspector will let you know if your extinguisher is on the recall list. Most boaters are not aware that their extinguishers also have a replacement date and even if the extinguisher appears to be serviceable, they should be removed from their boat once they reach that expiration date.

John Moyer also explained to me that the second most frequent question he receives is; "Will you report me to the police if my boat fails this inspection?" Absolutely not! The

inspection is between the examiner and the boat owner and we are performing the inspection, so you will be in compliance. It is for your safety and the safety of your passengers. That is why the decal is presented after you successfully pass the inspection. Whether it is on the first visit or after the boat owner has addressed any deficiency. Our goal is to increase boating safety for both the boat owner and the rest of the boating public.

How do you schedule a Free VSC for your boat? You can contact John Moyer as provided in the information at the end of this column. You can also use the US Coast Guard App on your smartphone by selecting that option. Once submitted, your request will be delivered electronically to at least five certified vessel examiners in your area. Both the US Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Power Squadron can perform VSCs and the request will go to both organizations. You can also request a VSC by visiting Flotilla 95's website <http://uscgauxmarco.org/>, or through the US Coast Guard Auxiliary VSC website - <http://wow.uscgaux.info/content.php?unit=V-DEPT&category=i-want-a-vsc>.

Take the time to request a VSC and get your boat inspected.

To schedule your **FREE** Vessel Safety Check, please call: John Moyer, (239)-248-7078 or Coast Guard Auxiliary Station – Flotilla 95, (239) 394-5911 or email John at [Jmoyer1528@aol.com](mailto:Jmoyer1528@aol.com).

For more information about safe boating courses Joe Riccio, (239)-384-7416 or [CGAUXCOURSES@GMAIL.COM](mailto:CGAUXCOURSES@GMAIL.COM).

For those interested in joining Flotilla 95, USCG Auxiliary, please call Bob Shmihluk at (215) – 694-3305