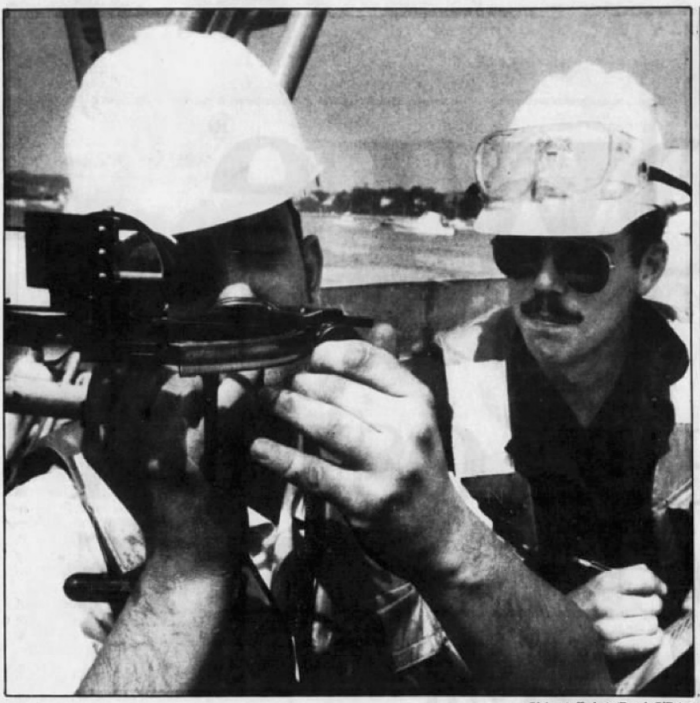

Globe staff photo/Frank O'Brien

Coast Guardsmen Scott Chambers and Norman Richardson mark a location in Dorchester Bay before putting buoy No. 5 back on station.

No off-season for Coast Guard 'ants' who tend buoys from N.H. to Plymouth

CITY LIFE

MARVIN PAVE

The Chris Craft went speeding by about 80 yards off the starboard side, and Coast Guard Quartermaster Scott Chambers couldn't take it anymore.

He grabbed the microphone on board the 46-foot buoy tender in Dorchester Bay and said in a loud tone, "Skipper, slow that boat down now. Slow that boat down to no-wake speed."

But it was like trying to control traffic on the nearby Southeast Expressway.

Oblivious to the signal balls on the mast of the Coast Guard work vessel and to the verbal warning, the operator of the Chris Craft kept the throttle open. His boat created a wake that would rock the buoy tender enough to prevent Chambers and the rest of the four-man crew from safely lowering a conical red "nun" buoy to the water.

The buoy, one of 372 in shallow water between Hampton, N.H., and Plymouth, was having its biannual inspection. The crew replaced its 3,000-pound mooring sinker and chain and scraped seaweed from its lower casing.

The speedboat-generated delay made the day that much longer for Chambers and his fellow Aids to Navigation Team members – coxswain Chip Richardson, engineer Ken Haggerty and seaman Paul Vaillancourt.

Just when they thought it was safe to resume – you guessed it – the Chris Craft came inbound at full throttle, making it impossible to lower the hollow, 680-pound buoy, which hung from a hydraulic lift at the stern. Chambers shouted vainly into the mike one more time.

"Sure wish we had a boarding officer with us," mused Chambers as he stood with hands on hips.

In addition to their regular inspections, the crew said that collisions with tugs or barges, shifting sands and violent storms can also send the "ants" to sea for unscheduled emergency repairs to buoys. Because of their work load, the so-called ANT Team sometimes sleeps on board.

"Some of the boaters may not understand or appreciate what the buoy tenders are doing out there," says the ANT Team's officer in charge, Chief Paul Driscoll, "but I sure do. They have an unsung job and they do it well."

The 18-member ANT Team is headquartered at Coast Guard Group Boston on Commercial Street. The shifts rotate every other week: One crew inspects the 358 unlighted and 14 lighted buoys while another is assigned to maintain and resupply the 34 lighthouses under Coast Guard jurisdiction.

Driscoll remembered the Christmas Eve two years ago when he was on duty with the lighthouse maintenance crew and Graves Light – an important navigational landmark – had failed.

"We went out to Graves," he said, "and finally got the generator going again. Then we just beat a tough winter storm back into port. Four guys almost spent Christmas night in a lighthouse instead of at home with their families."

Some areas of Boston Harbor, Driscoll said during a visit to the buoy tender, are "very forgiving. Should you run aground, you may hit a sandy bar.

"But you could strike sharp granite rock in other areas and rip the bottom out of your boat. That's why the buoys are there – to mark the outer points of a safe channel."

Richardson's crew members take special pride in their important but unglamorous work: At the bow of buoy tender 46301 is a caricature of an ant at work fixing two buoys. Under the drawing is the caption, "If it fails, we sail."

There isn't any off-season for the buoy-tending crew, although the pace is slowed somewhat in winter.

"Overall," Vaillancourt said, "it's a pretty nice work atmosphere with pleasant scenery."

Indeed, on this early July day, the ANT Team can look to the south and see the Blue Hills in the distance. Quincy's Marina Bay is at starboard and the downtown Boston skyline is to port. The bastions at Fort Independence in South Boston look much as they did more than a century ago.

But a darkening sky, which will later open up and drench the Boston area, doesn't allow the Coast Guardsmen much time to stop and admire the view.

Richardson and Vaillancourt scrape the last of the seaweed off Buoy No. 10 as Chambers resights the exact position of the sinker and double checks it on a computer printout. Haggerty mans the hydraulic controls.

Buoy No. 10 is soon back in the bay.

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