

compared to a civilian job and a normal work schedule. We work about half of the year," explained New York native Petty Officer Third Class Erickson Almonte, who has been stationed at Manasquan Inlet since September 2019. Usually standing duty shifts are forty-eight to seventy-two hours long with alternating weekends on duty.

Almonte was working a desk job in the finance industry when he decided to join the Coast Guard. "I chose the one thing I never did, a job on the water," he said. Being stationed at Manasquan Inlet means he can see his friends from SUNY Farmingdale and his New York family. "My schedule here allows me to also take classes on my free time, and I already earned fifty-five credits towards my degree for free," Almonte said. Sea school classes also count towards collegiate credit.

Seaman Jessica Stafford joined the Coast Guard after working two jobs while trying to go to school at the same time in her home state of North Carolina. "There had to be a better way," she said, "and I was set to join the Navy until a friend I had in the Coast Guard asked me to visit him in Florida, and it was awesome." She's been at Station Manasquan

Inlet since October 2018 and recalled when the local community came to their support during the last federal government shutdown. "We didn't get paid for almost two months and were so grateful to receive gift cards from the community," she said. "We were able to get groceries and what we needed, and I'll never forget that help from the locals."

A dedicated maintenance crew is on duty every day so that guardsmen can concentrate on preparedness while on standby for search-and-rescue emergency missions. Upon graduating from boot camp, each guardsman undergoes additional training for law enforcement responsibilities, boarding teams, and standing watch. One aspect that sets the Coast Guard apart is that boot camp graduates can try various jobs before deciding upon a permanent specialty. "This is the only branch of the military where you leave basic training without a pre-designated job," O'Donnell said.

Stafford added that the ability to try a job in the field first helps each person figure out which position is right for him or her. "You might hate a job you thought you'd enjoy and can try something else. This system is very helpful," she said.

The crew at Station Manasquan

Inlet is more than just a branch of the military. "These people are the best friends I ever had, the siblings you didn't know you wanted," Stafford said. "You spend so much time together with everyone, we get very close." That family shifts every year when some crew will be transferred to other stations while new crew members arrive. Typically, the maximum time that someone is stationed at one location is four years.

A new concern for all three is the vast increase in the number of boats on area waterways because of the pandemic. "More people who are new to boating on the water means more recreational boating safety inspections," Almonte said. "I wish more people at least wore lifejackets when boating." They recommend local boaters take boating courses and always ensure safety of their passengers.

A long-standing tradition for the Coast Guard is Morning Colors, a ceremony held each morning at every Coast Guard station at 8:00 AM, where the United States Flag and Coast Guard flags are raised while *Reveille* is played. Evening colors occurs at sunset, so the time varies each day. Civilians are encouraged to pause when they are within earshot of the ceremony's iconic bugle.

Station Manasquan Inlet often holds open houses and tours and participates in many local events including career days at schools (where students learn about the life of a coast guardsman) and with assisting navigation and safety during offshore powerboat races.

"This is the best job I've ever had," O'Donnell said. "I wish more people knew this was available as an opportunity." He explained that he was motivated by a higher need for service and found his calling as a member of the Coast Guard. "I am a huge fan of teaching and instructing, and when I see someone have that light bulb 'a-ha' moment—when they get it—it's worth it."

The men and women of United States Coast Guard Station Manasquan Inlet continue to stand at the ready to help the Jersey Shore community whenever they are needed. ♦



At Station Manasquan Inlet, 29-foot response boats are used primarily for law enforcement but can also tow smaller boats.

Jill Ocone