

Auxiliary linguists offer global resource

By Susan Schept
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A little-known asset of the Coast Guard stands ready to help in crisis — the Coast Guard Auxiliary's linguist corps.

Klaus and Brigitte Baumann, both native German speakers, started the corps in 1997. Klaus Baumann, 68, said he decided to organize a network that the active-duty Coast Guard and Navy could use. After the Jan. 12 earthquake in Haiti, Baumann assembled 20 French and Creole interpreters.

MEETING DEMAND

The linguist corps reports the most requests for Russian, Chinese, French, Portuguese and Italian. Languages with the most speakers in the corps are Spanish, French, Italian, Russian and Chinese.

Source: Coast Guard Auxiliary

"That is part of my training, to anticipate the need," he said.

The Coast Guard held off sending the bilingual auxiliary because officials felt the situation was too dire for unpaid volunteers, said Capt. Mark Rizzo, chief director of the auxiliary at Coast Guard

Headquarters in Washington. The military was able to find enough interpreters, he said, so the auxiliary members were not required.

The linguist corps has 380 people who can speak 43 languages. They are mechanics, doctors, lawyers and language professors, Klaus Baumann said.

Baumann, of St. Augustine, Fla., said he learned so much from an auxiliary boating safety class that he decided to join the group in 1994.

He specialized in radio communications and became a watchstander at a Coast Guard station in Michigan City, Ind. He soon became district staff officer for communications, then took an assignment to do safety checks on recreational boats.

During a May 1997 visit to Coast Guard Headquarters, he was asked if the auxiliary had any linguists.

"I said, 'I'm sure there are. You're looking at one,'" he said.

Baumann started with a one-page list of volunteers. Then he established testing criteria, with some auxiliary members serving as language examiners.

Translators have to be U.S. citizens, undergo federal background checks, have a security clearance and complete Federal Emergency Management Agency courses on handling emergencies. The corps can deploy only on Coast Guard

orders. The service pays members' travel expenses.

In 2008, the corps began to assist the Coast Guard and Navy

in the Africa Partnership Station, which teaches foreign coast guards how to patrol. In 2009, 40 interpreters deployed on Coast

Guard and Navy vessels.

Oscar Gallo, a native Belgian who has been in the auxiliary for 22 years, deployed to Senegal for

two weeks in February 2009 to help with APS. He taught meteorology, oceanography, and search and rescue in French.

"I think what we're doing is building relationships, and I think our country needs that more than anything," Gallo said. □

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