

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

THE OTHER WATERBORNE SERVICE

Photo courtesy Lanier Harbor Marina

Boaters join up to begin a poker run on Georgia's Lake Lanier, one of the most popular lakes in the southeast. Constructed by the Corps of Engineers in the 1950s, Lanier has 10 marinas, 54 launching sites and over 100 islands.

When most people think of boating and the military, what service heaves-to in the mind's eye? Sure, the Navy may pass on the horizon but if you're a dyed-in-the-wool recreational boater, chances are you think of that big white boat with the red racing stripe that says, "Uncle Sam on the water."

The U.S. Coast Guard, with its search and rescue, law enforcement and boating safety missions, probably ranks at the top of your list — and for many boaters, this military service would be up there all alone.

But for millions of others the only Coast Guard cutter they'll ever see is in a recruiting ad on TV and there isn't much chance that one of the agency's fast, new 44-foot motor lifeboats will cross their wake. Yet, there is another military presence on our waters and in some ways, you could say it outranks the Coast Guard in its services to recreational boaters: the U.S. Army.

Really? The Army?

Yes, sir!

While the caissons may go rolling along on land, the U.S. Army's Corps of Engineers plays a major role in recreational boating even though its mission on the rivers, lakes and bays of this nation doesn't grab headlines in the boating press the way the Coast Guard's do.

"Actually, we have more vessels than the Coast Guard. And the Navy, too, for

that matter," reports Maj. Gen. Hans Van Winkle. As the Army's deputy commanding general for Civil Works, he runs the part of the Corps of Engineers that deals with recreation, navigation and water resources management.

"The Coast Guard is a great organization," Van Winkle goes on. "I've talked to a lot of those guys. I admire what they do and I think the American public understands what the Coast Guard does."

Van Winkle knows the Coasties well. He sailed against the Coast Guard Academy while a member of the Army sailing team during his years at West Point.

"When people think of the Coast Guard they see a stricken vessel wallowing in heavy seas and a white cutter slicing through the waves to rescue the crew," says Van Winkle. "And maybe there's a helicopter hovering overhead, ready to drop pumps and rescue swimmers."

Today more people visit Corps of Engineers facilities each year than visit all our national parks and with over 450 lakes in 43 states and 3,500 boat launching ramps, a huge number are boaters. In fact, the Corps is now the nation's leading provider of water-based recreation.

"I don't think the public understands what the Corps does nearly as well," he adds. "It may not always be that dramatic but it's as important to boaters as it is to

commercial navigation, and we need to do a better job of explaining to the boating public what we do, how we do it, and what we want to do for recreation in the future."

Anchors Aweigh

Corps services to boating aren't necessarily bigger or better than the Coast Guard's, Van Winkle points out, just different. Often the services are similar, like boating safety; they just do it in some different places. And many of the jobs the Corps performs are so unique to his agency that boaters would be in trouble without them.

Launch your boat at South Carolina's Thurmond Lake, the southeast's largest, and you'll sail Savannah River waters backed-up by a Corps dam over a mile long. Take your boat down the Mississippi from Minneapolis and you'll pass through 29 Corps operated locks by the time you reach the mouth of the Ohio River. Liveaboard at California's Marina del Rey and you'll have a lot of company at the largest small craft harbor in the U.S., built by the Corps over 40 years ago. Head out of Florida's Indian River for billfishing in the Gulfstream and you'll pass through Port St. Lucie Inlet dredged out and maintained by the Corps.

This is a federal government agency commanded by active-duty Army officers

and staffed by over 34,000 civilian employees. On the military side, its job is to build Army bases, clear mine fields and manage real estate. But on the civilian side — Van Winkle's Civil Works program — the Corps is in charge of the nation's "water resources infrastructure." That means the agency builds, operates and maintains bricks-and-mortar projects for commercial navigation, flood control, power generation, and water supply.

It's a proud heritage for an agency that has roots at Bunker Hill where engineers of the Continental Army built fortifications in 1775. But as the Corps moves into the 21st century, it is faced with a different kind of construction challenge, meeting the recreational needs of the American public.

The Corps has over 4,000 recreation areas but many have seen a better day. Some of the facilities that provide public access to the water running through those locks or behind those dams are in bad shape. Launch ramps are too small to meet local demand, parking for boat trailers is limited, marina slips don't have adequate utilities and campgrounds can't accommodate today's RVs.

Estimates for critical maintenance and repairs at recreation sites is over \$49 million, Van Winkle says, but needed improvements could cost more than five times that amount. In addition, the backlog for dredging the channels that many recreation boaters depend upon is just over \$276 million.

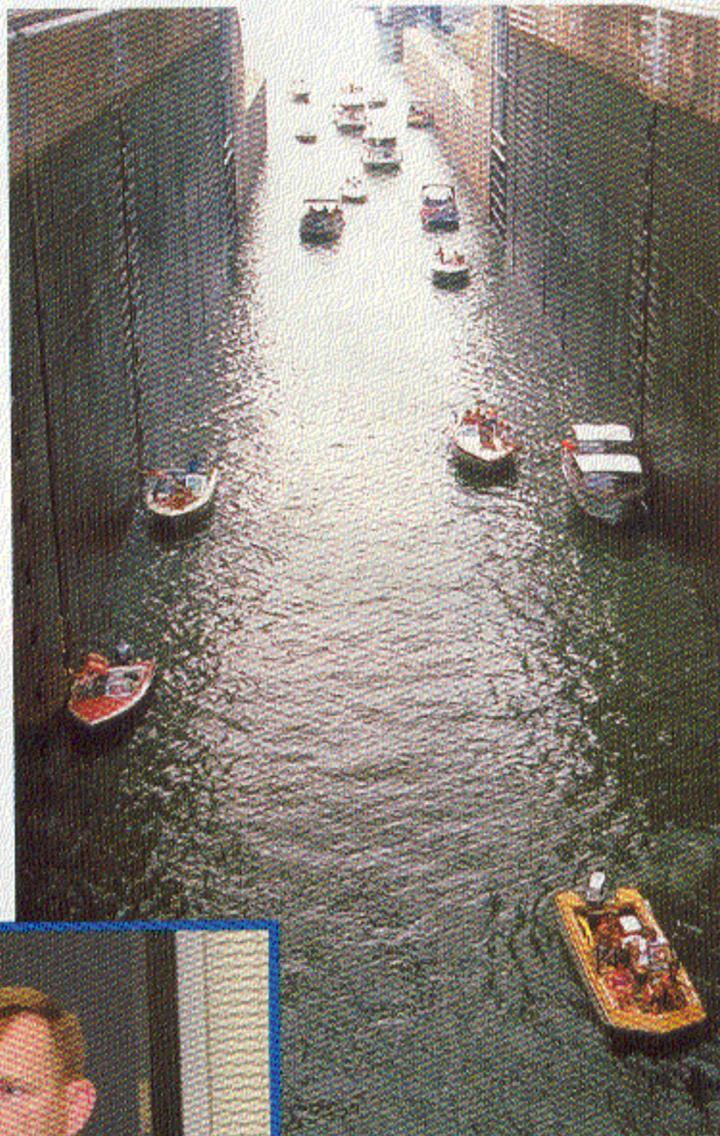
A Modern Mission

"The Corps of Engineers became involved in recreation almost as an afterthought," reports George Tabb, civilian chief of the Recreation Programs Section. "Legislation passed in 1944 allowed the Corps, then under the War Dept., to include recreation in its reservoir projects while they were creating lakes for water supply, flood control and generating electricity."

But up until the 1960s, Tabb says, the Corps was basically a custodian of recreational facilities.

"Corps civilian employees would mow the grass, clean the restrooms and pick up the garbage," he says. "We used to have what we called 'the beer can philoso-

phy' of recreation management at our lakes. Wherever we'd find a pile of beer cans, we'd put in parking and launching facilities because that seemed to be where people wanted to have access."



Photos: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Thousands of boaters use locks operated by the Corps of Engineers, like this one (above) on the Tennessee River. Maj. General Hans Van Winkle (at left) is deputy commanding general for Civil Works.

That started changing in the 1970s, Tabb says, as public demand grew and the agency began to actively design and manage facilities specifically for recreation at its many lakes and other water resources projects, and started hiring recreation professionals to run them.

But in recent years, funding for the Corps has not kept up with the nation's fast growing and fast changing recreational needs. So last year the Corps went to Congress with a comprehensive \$330 million plan to modernize its aging and overcrowded recreation facilities. Since recreation is not a Corps program, per se, Congress failed to approve the proposal and instead continued the piecemeal funding approach that leaves recreation chronically underfunded.

"We are funded from the bottom up, on a project-by-project basis, unlike the

U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service and other federal land management agencies," Van Winkle explains. "Congress appropriates a big pot of money to them that each agency then parcels out to its various programs, recreation being one."

"They don't have to justify to Congress each and every project that they do," Van Winkle adds. "I can't say, 'here's my recreation needs throughout the agency' and go forward with a budget to meet them. I have individual projects spread around in numerous congressional districts under specific authorizations."

Nonetheless, the modernization package proposed last year did draw attention to the dilemma the Corps faces of trying to satisfy increasing demand for recreation with outmoded facilities and dwindling resources. Van Winkle said a similar proposal could possibly go forward in the 107th Congress once Bush Administration priorities are established.

Time is of the essence as 2001 is the year that the first wave of Baby Boomers begins hitting 55 and that means more and more people will be retiring and have more time for recreation in the years ahead. That, in turn, will create unprecedented demand for water-based recreation in this country and Van Winkle says the Corps has to be ready for it.

A new federal effort, this one involving the Corps and seven other agencies, holds a lot of promise for recreational boating in the long-term. As co-chairman of the recently launched Federal Recreation Lakes Leadership Council, Van Winkle is moving the agencies toward improving water sports and all forms of recreation at nearly 1,800 federally owned man-made lakes.

The Council, created in 1999, grew out of recommendations of a presidential commission. Last November the Council designated 30 lakes — a dozen of them Corps of Engineers lakes — for pilot projects to refocus management toward recreation, create local partnerships and spur private investment in facilities at federal lakes.

"It's really a cross-fertilization in which the agencies are learning from each other how we can better serve the public while improving utilization of our facilities," Van Winkle reports. "From the customers' point of view, when they visit a federal lake, the facilities, services and management philosophy should meet their expectations no matter whose lake it is. That's what we're striving for." ■

— By Ryck Lydecker