

Interview with Mr. Trevor Parra of the US Coast Guard

Mr. Parra is a Marine safety officer and Commander of the US Coast Guard in Singapore, responsible for shipping that comes in and out (vessel inspections, sea walls, and marine casualties).

Questions

Has working for the US Coast Guard always been a goal for you growing up?

It was a means to an end. I needed to fund my path to college.

a. If so, what interested you about the Coast Guard?

I used the Coast Guard as an opportunity to get money for college.

b. If not, what were your passions growing up, and what finally did inspire you to join the Coast Guard?

It wasn't an aspiration. The Coast Guard provides opportunities in all fields and I wanted to go to college.

Does your job require you to move often? What are the various kinds of assignments available, and what do the time periods look like?

The Coast Guard assignments are typically 2-4 years in any one place. Singapore is very rare, all assignments are mostly up and down the East and West coast of the US and in American Samoa.

The various assignments depend on your specialty. You can be a nurse, doctor, aviator etc. Mostly every field is represented in the Coast Guard.

Maritime advisor, liaison officer, law enforcement and immigration are a few of the assignments.

How are Coast Guardsmen assigned to jobs (what does the process look like)?

There are 42000 active duty members. You can switch jobs easily, doing a little bit of everything overseas.

Singapore wants more law enforcement training, more capacity training, and more participation in bodies like the State Department. Guardsmen are assigned jobs where they have a certain background or proficiency.

Prior to officially joining the Coast Guard, you must attend an 8 week boot camp in Cape May. Can you describe your experiences during boot camp? What were some of your struggles and highlights?

If you choose to enlist, you must participate in the boot camp. After boot camp, you decide what your speciality is and then accordingly you get sent to that school of specialty. If you want to become an officer, you attend the Coast Guard Academy. Most of those involved in the Coast Guard are between the ages of 18-25. In boot camp, it is psychologically more enduring, having to adjust to a new lifestyle and manage a rigid schedule, but it is extremely effective and trains you and your counterparts to work as a team.

I highly encourage anybody who is interested to take up the Coast Guard because of the service and the mission of lives, property and environment.

Living overseas for your profession, has foreign language proved to be of importance in your various assignments?

Foreign language is not a must for the Coast Guard: English is the main language of communication. Foreign language is more so beneficial for the Foreign Service. However, the Army, Navy and Air Force foreign affairs officer program is effective for those who speak foreign languages.

What are some of your favorite aspects of being a Coast Guardsman? What have been some of the biggest struggles?

My favorite aspects of being a Coast Guardsman are the great opportunities that are afforded to its members.

Professionally, the Coast Guard provides the freedom of being able to choose a career path as well as dabble in other paths (not in your line of specialty.)

Personally, I believe that the Coast Guard provides some of the best benefits and entitlements for families. Everyone is very family oriented, and the Coast Guard really operates as a close community.

Additionally, the Coast Guard has paid for numerous degrees that I undertook through the length of my career.

Some of my biggest struggles were the timing and surrounding yourself with the right mentors. You won't perform higher by not being with people higher than you. Also, another struggle is that as you begin to raise a family and the kids become older, moving around gets more challenging. You have to begin prioritizing your children, their lives and their education as well.

Is there any specific degree that students should pursue in college that would best prepare them for joining the Coast Guard?

For Officer Candidate School, engineering and STEM subjects are in high demand across every organization.

Students with aviation experience, civilian aviation license, as well as lawyers, doctors, nurse practitioners don't have to go through OCS. Instead, they are directly brought in as senior officers.

Could you describe some of your assignments prior to Singapore? How did the objectives differ?

As a commander, how do your responsibilities and goals differ as compared to a Lieutenant Commander and lower ranks?

As a commander, regardless of your rank, you are held to a higher standard because of increased responsibility and the requirement to perform at a higher level.

You begin as an apprentice, and then a journeyman; training lower ranks.

Then you progress to a Master of your craft and you have to balance it with being a good leader, manager and being good at helping people understand the job.

As you rise in the ranks, the more senior you are, the less hands on you are.

How do you believe the Coast Guard helps with maintaining and forming relations between the US and other nations?

The Coast Guard has such a broad and unique authority and jurisdiction.

Nations rely heavily on humanitarian and capacity building. The Coast Guard is the only organization in the world that has both military and law enforcement authority. We are able to conduct certain operations no others can.

The Coast Guard is a trusted partner throughout the world. It has broad expertise ranging from humanitarianism to sovereignty.

What are some key differences between being a coast guardsman in the US and overseas? Do you have a preference?

Regardless of where you are, the Coast Guard is trusted worldwide.

However, one of the biggest differentiating factors is the customers we deal with. Foreign countries may ask for different reasons and have different tasks for the Coast Guard as compared to the United States. for example, quantity and execution of law enforcement requests.

One of the biggest tasks in the Coast Guard is that you must know and understand your customer.

In the US, customers are everyday citizens, such as recreational and commercial boaters, law enforcement for transnational organized crime, drug and human smuggling, illegal fishing enforcement, and environmental response and contingencies (e.g. hurricanes and mass flooding) that affect waters. But as you start to go

international, the types of issues and demographics begin to evolve and change, which means that the focus of your mission will often be different.

What are some of your future goals and aspirations for your career?

I want to keep going and make it to the next rank or possibly retire.

I would like to be captain and be commanding officer of the largest unit possible, and then follow as a diplomat.

My career has been unbelievable, every job I have been assigned to is because I want to be challenged.

Singapore is fairly unique: as a defense attaché, the process is extensive.

However, my favorite part is helping other people out, not just Americans.

Is there anything else you would like to inform students looking to work for the US Coast Guard?

If you are interested in joining a military service in general, research the Coast Guard more. It's an organization most people are unfamiliar with.

It's not only a viable, a very challenging opportunity but a great option.

It's also not a binding life choice. You can come in for a 4 year tour and then go onto something else completely. Having a service academy on your resumé and being a successful officer in the Coast guard is highly beneficial regardless of where you choose to work.