

MARINE LIFE

A LOOK INSIDE THE NATIONAL MARINE TRAINING CENTER

By Paul Koscak, photos by Glenn Fawcett

Churned by a stiff evening breeze, the sea grew rough as the crew aboard a sleek interceptor searched in the dark for a reported smuggler. Then a blip with coordinates to the suspect flashed on the boat's radar. Wasting no time, the commander of Air and Marine Operations' 39-foot Midnight Express hollered for the crew to hold on and pushed the throttles full forward.

The boat's four 225-horse-power Mercury engines roared. As the accelerating hull hit the swells, it boomed like a kettle drum and sprayed water over the deck with a hiss. Bouncing from the waves at more than 50 knots, the vessel at times became airborne for an instant then slammed onto the water with a hollow thud, shaking the boat.

As the interceptor sped to its target, the crew checked their equipment and prepared for the unknown. That blip could be anything from a family setting sail to a ship overloaded with illegal aliens to a similar high-speed with well-armed runners

determined to deliver their contraband.

Using night-vision goggles, the navigator finally spotted the shrouded vessel and shouted headings over the din, guiding the commander through the dark for the intercept.

The gap rapidly narrowed. Now, just feet away, the commander gave the signal. Instantly, the interceptor's powerful flood lights and blue strobes illuminated the craft and the surrounding sea, stunning the unsuspecting subjects. The pursuers stood ready to board.

"Failure to heave-to [stop] is a felony," said Martin "Marty" Wade, the National Marine Training Center's director since 2012.

Wade's law enforcement career goes back to 1995, starting as a U.S. customs inspector and later a marine enforcement officer in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. "There were only a handful of us back then," he recalled. Wade advanced to a marine

supervisor and marine director in Miami and eventually served as director of marine operations in Washington, D.C., before arriving at the center.

While the simulated chase and all its drama happened as described, marine interdiction agents crewed the suspect craft. The episode is one of many realistic experiences those attending AMO's National Marine Training Center in St. Augustine, Florida, can expect and where U.S. Customs and Border Protection along with other federal, state, local and even foreign law enforcement organizations turn to keep their maritime skills sharp. International participants have included law enforcers from Paraguay, Malaysia, Ecuador, French West Indies and Colombia.

Immense task

More than 500 marine interdiction and U.S. Border Patrol agents visit the center every year, taking courses covering basic and advanced maritime skills, recurrent certifications and specialized tactics used to protect the nation's coasts, lakes and rivers.

That job is accomplished in a remarkably nondescript building with two classrooms and adjoining dock that accommodates 30 vessels.

"Don't be fooled by our small size," Wade stressed. Just six AMO and six U.S. Border Patrol instructors teach 50 classes per year. In 2016, they chalked



Supervisory Air and Marine Agent Mark White from the San Diego Marine Unit was among those benefiting from the National Marine Training Center's small classes.