

# Building Leaders on the Chesapeake<sup>1</sup>

By Greg Tasker

**Sea Scouting's SEAL program teaches teenagers the leadership skills needed to sail a ship—and navigate through life.**

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As the 46-foot Morgan sailboat, *der PeLiKan*, makes its way out of St. Michaels harbor into the choppy waters of the Miles River, Ashley Charbonnet and her crew of fellow Sea Scouts grapple to hoist the mainsail and let the boat ride the wind.

Ashley is "boatswain of the day," meaning she is in charge of the other three crew members: Daniel Gordon, Anne Simiele, and Jake Greiner, who take turns as lookout, helmsman, and navigator. The foursome is hard at work in an intensive weeklong course called Sea Scout Advanced Leadership Training, or SEAL.

Already, the Sea Scouts have sailed their floating classroom—under the watchful eyes of "Skipper" Jerry Crabtree and "Commodore" Doug Yeckley—across the expansive Chesapeake Bay to St. Michaels, a popular sailing port on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Their days have been a mix of work on the boat and other chores, sailing, and classes on communicating, delegating, motivating, and training—skills effective leaders need to navigate not only the course of a ship but also, some would say, life.

## A test of leadership

This morning, Ashley, a high school senior and member of Ship 1 in Slidell, La., has ordered her crew to make several tacks, crisscrossing turns in the murky river, to steer clear of other sailboats and buoys marking shallow water.

It is time for yet another tack, and Ashley shouts: "Ready about!"

The crew prepares to turn *der PeLiKan* through the wind. A lone voice grumbles from the cockpit: "Again?"

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It's a question laced with mutiny. Seventeen-year-old Daniel is tired of tacking, tired of loosening and pulling ropes to adjust the jib sheet, tired of shifting himself in the cockpit. Daniel, it seems, wants to kick back and cruise for awhile. Something besides a sailing maneuver is at stake. Ashley's leadership is being tested. But that is exactly why Ashley, Daniel, and the others are here—to learn how to be good leaders.

"Do you wanna run into the shore?" Ashley yells, pointing to the clearly visible and not-so-distant landscape.

Ashley and Daniel would butt heads again that warm, overcast June morning. Ashley's leadership had been as choppy as the river—one minute she was in command—and the next she was chatting, distracted from her duties, then barking changes in navigation at the last moment. And Daniel, who struggled to assert himself in a hypothetical survival exercise the night before, was now all too eager to speak up.

"Ashley needs to pay a little more attention to what she's doing," said Douglas E. Yeckley, the boat's "officer of the deck" and Skipper of Ship 548 in southern Maryland. "Daniel needs to learn to take orders better. Anne was the first boatswain [a couple of days earlier], and she handled him much better. She communicated much more directly."

Despite the tensions, the Sea Scouts worked fairly well as a team. After the morning cruise, Yeckley and Nikki Lanzaron, a former Sea Scout and one of the instructors aboard ship, exchanged observations about what had transpired between Ashley and Daniel. Throughout the training program, the Sea Scouts are evaluated on everything they do, and they evaluate each other as well.

## **Bringing SEAL home**

"This type of leadership training is a terrific opportunity. It's the kind of thing that you'll understand its value later in life," said Jeff Murray, a former Sea Scout and another instructor aboard *der PeLiKan*. "You're learning lots of leadership skills, which will certainly put you further ahead of the game. To be exposed to this kind of program as a teenager is an incredible opportunity."

One of SEAL's goals is to help local ships. Graduates return to their ships to practice and implement the leadership skills they've learned, improving the quality of the local program. It is something Daniel, Ashley, Jake, and Anne are intent on doing.

"I want to help bring more people to my ship and get more involved," said Daniel, a high school senior from Bowie, Md. "I can see how much it would help to take a leadership role."

## **A floating leadership lab**

Days are fairly structured during the weeklong training course. The Sea Scouts rise early, make and serve breakfast—cereal, bagels, or pancakes—by 7 a.m. Lunch and dinner are their responsibility, too. Sometimes they cook in the galley, sometimes on a grill while the ship is docked. Then comes cleanup.

"One of their responsibilities is to focus on planning for the entire trip," Lanzaron said. "Although the meals were already planned, they had to make sure the amounts were adequate and then go out and do the shopping. It's a good way for them to be out in public and talk to people. They're ambassadors for Sea Scouting."

While docked for several days at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, the crew would spend their mornings sailing, practicing maneuvers, and changing crew roles.

"The boat is a leadership lab," said Jim Elroy, SEAL's training coordinator. "It allows students to immediately apply their newly learned skills and determine that those skills work. We see tremendous growth with many students during the week. The course is not about learning to operate boats. It is about management, leadership, teamwork, and goal-setting."

## **Learning how to teach**

The students spent afternoons in classes, sometimes on the boat, sometimes under a pavilion or on a grassy patch on the museum grounds. The leadership and management skills included goal setting, supervising, delegating, leadership styles, communicating, problem solving, coaching those who need help accomplishing a task, and motivating.

One afternoon, Daniel, of Ship 1009 in Bowie, was first on deck for a session on how to train. He decided to teach his fellow sailors how to tie a Palomar knot—a skill they would need to know during the cruise. Before his presentation, he had to create a training outline and then follow it during the session.

Daniel aptly demonstrated the task and then handed each person a fishing line and hook. As the others tried tying the knot, Daniel was attentive, quietly working with each person.

"When do you think you would use this kind of knot?" he asked.

The crew correctly guessed the knot is used for an anchor line or tying a hook on a fishing line.

"It's part of the course," Lanzaron explained, noting the SEAL graduates will be training their own crews back home in skills such as raising the mainsail, tying knots, and more. "I wanted [Daniel] to understand how important it was to train. I wanted him to understand why it's important to ask questions—it helps the learning process."

Reflecting on his newly graduated SEALs, Crabtree said: "I saw tremendous improvement the whole week. Jake grew more than anybody else. He was very quiet and reserved in the beginning. By the third or fourth day, he was almost like an extrovert. Anne worked really well behind the scenes. She's a very capable young lady."

Leaving Maryland, 16-year-old Anne was eager to return home to Westlake, Ohio, and Ship 225 to practice what she had learned.

"The one thing that sticks in my mind is it's O.K. to make a mistake," she said. "What makes a leader is the fact that he or she can admit when he or she is wrong and change things, make a difference.

"Throughout the week we all made small errors, but every one of us learned from those mistakes and grew from them. I can apply everything I learned from SEAL to every aspect of my life, not just Sea Scouts."

## Who's Who on the SEAL Crew

The members of the Chesapeake Bay SEAL crew represent a cross section of Sea Scouts. Here's a look at their hometown ships and activities.

**Jake Greiner**, 17, is a member of Ship Viking 101. The 13-member crew, based in Stratford, Conn., uses a 38-foot yawl to practice sailing maneuvers on Long Island Sound. Chartered to Stratford VFW Post 9460, the group's yearly highlight is a weeklong cruise. Last year, the crew sailed to Block Island, R.I., on Long Island Sound, and the year before, they made their way to Essex on the Connecticut River.

**Anne Simiele**, 16, is a member of Ship Indefatigable 225, based in Westlake, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb. The crew of 12 sails a 27-foot Catalina on Lake Erie. Ship 225 is chartered to St. Bernadette Catholic Church in Westlake and it plans an annual cruise to the Lake Erie islands or a visit to Cedar Point, an amusement park known for its fabulous roller coasters.

**Ashley Charbonnet**, 17, belongs to Ship "J" Walker 1, in Slidell, La., outside New Orleans. Her crew is small, just eight active members, and they take turns with three Laser sailboats. The group's chartered organization is Tammany Yacht Club Marina, and the crew sails on Lake Ponchartrain. The yearly highlight, Ashley says, has nothing to do with being on the water. It's an annual one-day course called "Damage Control," a simulated exercise in repairing holes, pipes,

and other malfunctions on a boat.

**Daniel Gordon**, 17, is a member of Ship Sea Devil 1009, in Bowie, Md., a suburb between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The crew is chartered to the Christian Community Presbyterian Church of Bowie.

Daniel's ship boasts about 15 active members. They have two sailboats and a Boston Whaler, and they practice their seamanship on the South River and Chesapeake Bay. The yearly highlight is a weeklong cruise, typically in the Chesapeake Bay area, although the crew has sailed as far away as the British Virgin Islands.

## Leadership Training Opportunities for Venturers

**SEAL** is one of three leadership development courses available for Venturers.

**The Venturing Leadership Skills Course** (BSA Supply No. 34340A) is taught at the unit, district, or council level and must be completed by Venturers who want to earn the program's Silver Award. **The Nature of Leadership** is a nationally run course taught in conjunction with a challenging outdoor high adventure activity.

Last summer's Nature of Leadership crew of six girls and five boys spent 14 days backpacking at the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. Plans are to offer the course next summer in Alaska with a trek near the Arctic Circle and whitewater rafting on the Yukon River. Contact your local council service center for more information.

## Sign Up for SEAL 2001

June's Chesapeake Bay training course was one of two SEAL events last summer; the other took place in the Florida Keys. More than 60 young people have attended SEAL training since the program began in 1996.

Sea Scouting, a part of the BSA's Venturing program for young men and women between the ages of 14 and 21, has 5,866 youth members nationwide registered in 512 ships.

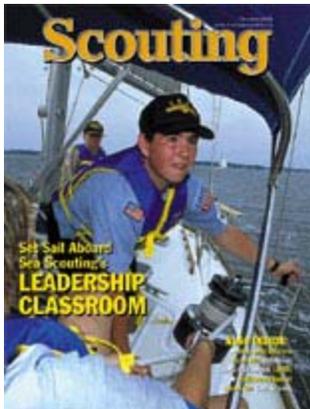
"SEAL is a very demanding course," said Jim Elroy, SEAL training coordinator and one of the program's founders. About 20 percent of SEAL students do not pass, he said.

Those who graduate are awarded a silver pendant consisting of two dolphins facing each other with a trident and BSA insignia in the center. The dolphins

represent the "at sea" nature of the course.

Applicants must be between 14 and 18 years old, hold Ordinary rank, be recommended by their ship's Skipper, and be mature enough to handle an adult-level leadership class. In addition, applicants must know how to sail, be able to perform coastal navigation, know how to tie all the knots required for Apprentice and Ordinary ranks, and know Apprentice and Ordinary rank skills well enough to teach them.

The cost of the weeklong SEAL course is \$150. Participants are responsible for transportation to and from the training sites. The deadline for applications is March 1, 2001.



**Sea Scout Daniel Gordon cranks in the jib sheet as the 46-foot ketch *der PeLiKan* prepares to come about. Writer Greg Tasker tells how Dan and three other Sea Scouts spent a week learning advanced leadership and management skills while sailing on Chesapeake Bay.**

Photograph by Walter Calahan.