Nantucket TODAY
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF NANTUCKET ISLAND

On the WATER

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A LIFE on the WATER

BY JOSHUA H. BALLING

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICOLE HARNISHEFGER
George Bassett claims to have the best office on the island, and he may very well be right.

The director of marine operations for Nantucket Island Resorts’ workplace is perched at the end of Swain’s Wharf overlooking the Nantucket Boat Basin, and on a recent day, he gazed out over a sport fisherman pulling up for a load of fuel, the harbor about three-quarters full of moored sailboats and pleasurecraft under an azure sky dotted by a scud of clouds. A light haze obscured Monomoy barely visible in the distance, the water lapping at the pilings of the finger piers below, as the freight boat rounded Brant Point.

But on Feb. 1, after 30 years overseeing the day-to-day operations of the Boat Basin, Bassett is stepping down, retiring for the second time in his career, after first spending a highly-decorated 26 years in the U.S. Coast Guard.

Over the course of his time at the Boat Basin, Bassett has been instrumental in making the 240-slip marina one of the most attractive in the country to the world’s most discerning sailors and yachtsmen alike, working within a small footprint that hasn’t grown a foot while the size of the boats it serves definitely has. Under his watch it’s received regional environmental honors and industry accolades, including MarinaLife magazine’s BestTransient Marina in the U.S. and Canada three years running.

TREAT EVERYONE THE SAME

But Bassett doesn’t care much about the awards, and his philosophy is simple: Treat everyone the same.

“That’s why they like to come here,” he said. “I’ve always said that any time someone comes into the marina, if it’s on a 31-foot boat, that’s the biggest boat they own. If it’s a 300-foot boat, that’s the biggest boat they own. We don’t care how much is in either checkbook. We treat them all the same. They are all just as important, and they like to be treated that way.

“Every morning when I come in, I write notes to the new arrivals, thanking them for selecting the Boat Basin. Attention to detail is what makes the difference. A chocolate on the pillow is not enough anymore. You need to go much further than that now.”
Bassett and his wife Sharon have five children and five grandchildren. He is philosophical about retirement, saying he hasn’t figured out exactly what he wants to do. He usually finds off the question with a joke.

“I am going to retire and live off my savings. I just don’t know what I’ll do the second day,” he wrote to staff in his retirement announcement.

“With five grandchildren, I may enter retirement and start changing diapers again. I’m very happy to see my kids off to school, and the day goes slow,” Bassett said. “A little too active,” Bassett, 72, came to life on the water in something of a roundabout way. He was born in Brockton, Mass., during the Rocky Marciano era, and remembered watching some of his early fights.

“I was the middle child of five and I got to be a little too active for the family,” they won the tournament, and I was out to see.

Over the course of his distinguished Coast Guard career, Bassett also commanded the 82-foot cutter Boston out of Woods Hole, and the 135-foot buoy tender White Sage. He traveled to the North Pole twice, the South Pole, Europe and every ocean but the Indian. He retired as chief warrant officer, and was prior to receiving his orders, received the United States Navy League’s Captain David H. Jarvis Award at the U.S. Coast Guard Officers of the Year, for inspirational leadership and professional competence.

“I absolutely loved the Coast Guard. I loved the fact that I was a high-school graduate that they put to such faith in. My first vessel was in charge of maintaining 400 buoys for the Cape and Islands. That’s a relief of a lot of responsibility to hang on somebody that young. In 26 years, I never had a bad tour. Some bad days, sure, but never a bad tour.”

But after almost 30 years in the Coast Guard, Bassett felt his body was time to move on. He wanted to retire before 50 and have a second career. He was offered command of a Great Lakes icebreaker, but the Guard wanted a 10-year commitment, which Bassett wasn’t willing to make.

BACK TO THE BASIN

As it turned out, his connection to Nantucket was about to pay dividends.

“Before I retired, I’d become friendly with Joe Lopes, and he was retiring after about 20 years here,” Bassett said. “The last year I was still in the Coast Guard, I interviewed with Walter Beinecke (then owner of the Blue Boat and much of the downtown commercial real estate) three times, and I ended up with the dockmaster job. Needless to say, that wasn’t his exactly what anywhere on you.”

Bassett officially retired from the Coast Guard in Woods Hole at 3 p.m., Friday, Jan. 31, 1986. He was on the job at the Bass Basin the next morning at 8 a.m. It was not exactly an auspicious beginning.
Baskets and his wife Sharon have five children and five grandchildren. He is philosophical about retirement, saying he hasn’t figured out exactly what he wants to do. He usually talks off the question with a joke: “I am going to retire and live off my savings. I just don’t know what I’ll do on the second day.” He warned staff in his retirement announcement.

“With five grandchildren, I may enter retirement and start changing diapers again. I’m telling everybody I’ll sleep until noon, change diapers until 5, and then close The Chicken Bin. It might not happen, but that’s what I’m telling everybody,” he said with a laugh.

“A LITTLE TOO ACTIVE”

Basset, 72, came to life on the water in something of a roundabout way. He was born in Brockton, Mass., during the Rocky Marciano era, and remembers watching some of his early fights.

“I was the middle child of five and I got to be a little too active for the family, so they farmed me out to an uncle and aunt in Barnstable in the 1950s, when I was in fourth, fifth and sixth grade,” Basset said. “My uncle was a weir fisherman, he ran a tugboat, and dragged me along, and I loved it. In sixth grade one summer, this beautiful white boat came into the harbor at Barnstable Village, and my uncle said, ‘that’s a Coast Guard boat. They save lives. I never forget it.”

GUARD DUTY

A month after graduating from West Bridgewater High School, Basset joined the Coast Guard. After boot camp, he was asked to be stationed somewhere near home, and they sent him to Alaska, the year it became a state. For his second assignment, he asked for Hawaii, and they sent him to Boston, where he ended up stationed on Cape Cod.

“My mother and father passed away at an early age, which kind of left me homeless, so I decided to stay in the Coast Guard. That was the sum of events that straightened me out,” Basset said. “It just took off from there. I passed and did quite well. I worked my way up through the ranks. I ran a 52-foot buoy boat, and a 45-foot buoy boat setting all the harbor buoys from Watch Hill, R.I. to the Cape Cod Canal.”

In the winter of 1969, Basset paid his first visit to Nantucket, and got hooked.

“We were stuck here, so we started opening up a channel for the sailors to get out. It was the year the Anglers Club opened up, and the guys over there invited myself and three of my crew to join them. That was my first association with Nantucket and the Anglers Club, and it’s been a long-standing association ever since.”

In 1974, he was back on the island and made two acquaintances that would change the course of his life.

“We were tied up right outside the face, and that was the first time I met Joe Lopes, who was the dockmaster then, and we went to Cap’s Tody’s to have dinner.

I wanted Basing with the cash-register girl. I wrote on a piece of paper ‘I think I’m madly in love with you’, and gave it to her without ever saying anything else. She ended up being my wife Sharon (Fishel), and that’s how I ended up here.”

Basset returned to the island over the years, maintaining his relationship with the Anglers Club. He struck up a friendship with Dan Kilhefner, who was studying navigation for fifth-grade students, and each time he was on the island, they’d take the class out to sea.

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“I absolutely loved the Coast Guard. I loved the fact that I was a high-school graduate that they put so much faith in. My first vessel was in charge of maintaining 400 buoys for the Cape and Islands. That’s a hell of a lot of responsibility to hang on somebody that young. In 26 years, I never had a bad issue. Some bad days, sure, but never had a bad one.”

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I came down to work, and this building was all shut up, winterized. The office was in the basement of The Harbor House then, but nobody was there. I had to wait until Monday to meet people."

The first year took some getting used to.

"Obviously there was a learning curve. I knew boats, I knew the oceans, I knew the laws, I knew how to help people dock boats. But going from military life to civilian life, it was quite a difficult adjustment. When Water (Biehn) hired me, I trained for five or ten-year commitment and he said we do it one year at a time, and decide on your performance whether your come back. It worked out pretty well," Bassert said.

"I knew the boating business, but I was dealing more with yachtsmen than boaters, the blazers, the tie, but all that's changed now," he added.

Nantucket has always been an international yacht destination, but when Bassert started at the Boat Basin, "a 100-foot boat was a huge generation. Now it's a medium-size boat," he said. "We had one come in that was 36 feet long. It took up the entire length of the dock."

That simple math poses a big challenge for the Boat Basin, which doesn't have this on-the-water footprint since the late 1960s.

"The marina has not changed at all, and that's a megaproblem. The boats have all grown in size, in widths in particular. The marina hasn't grown an inch, but the boats have. We have to start pre-planning in January to figure out where they are going to go," Bassert said.

When the Boat Basin was built, it was designed for 243 slips, but give the size of today's boats, the marina figures its occupancy based on linear feet, which equates to about 200 boats a night in the summer.

The Boat Basin has four-year-old employees and 36 at the height of the season, half of them year-round residents. It charges between $6 and $8.75 a foot per night based on the size of the boat, with a minimum charge of $210.

"From a customer's point of view, we're the most expensive marina around. It may seem strange to say that, but because of the way we treat people, we've got an 85 percent return rate," Bassert said. "On the other hand, where can you buy a new boat for that? We've got 18 bathrooms, shower facilities, and the best view on the island. The smaller boats, they make the most use of our facilities. I'm very proud of the way our employees help them up."

Unlike many marinas, the Boat Basin doesn't cater more to sailboats than powerboats, or vice versa. During Nantucket Race Week, the island's nine-day salute to sailing each August that culminates in the Opera House Cup wooden boat race, the Basin is filled to overflowing with sailboats. At the same time, it's hosting a big offshore fishing tournament.

"Sailboats don't like powerboats, and powerboats don't like sailboats, but we have a nice mix here," Bassert said.

Bassert, the Basin staff and NBR are also involved in a number of charitable and nonprofit endeavors, working with Nantucket S.T.A.R.S. (Sports and Therapeutic Accessible Recreation), Nantucket Community Sailing, Holidays for Heroes, the Nantucket chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, and the Egan Maritime Institute.

The Basin annually donates a slip to SAIL in Provail, which offers disabled children and adults an opportunity to sail around the island. Earlier this summer, a fishing tournament Bassert was involved with raised $60,000 in a single day for Adams Camp Nantucket, which provides a week of respite for disabled children and their families.

Last year, the Big Game Battle sportfishing tournament presented S.T.A.R.S. $30,000 on his behalf in honor of his charity work.

Despite all his jokes about retirement, Bassert knows in his heart it's time to give up the daily grind.

"My body is getting pretty well beat up. I'm 72, and this is my 55th summer of working. I come from a family that all died young, my mom at 59, my dad at 52, and here I am still working at 72. I think it's time," he said.

"I still love the job. I love the people. I enjoy helping get 27-year-old kids through the system. I touch them to get them to work on George's time. That's 10 minutes before you're supposed to be there. You do that, and you'll structure your life in a good way. I'll miss the employers and the young people. But it's time for some new ideas, some fresh ideas. I recognize that. I'm given it all I can. I'm leaving the marina with a great team. The last four years, we've been recognized as the best transAtlantic marina in the country. I'd like to go out on top."

The back of Bassert's otherwise standard-size Nantucket Island Resorts business card perhaps sums up his philosophy on life best: "Life should be a journey to the grave with the intent of arriving safely in an attractive and well-protected body, but to skid in sideways—Limousine in one hand, chocolate in the other—body thoroughly used up, totally worn out and screaming, "Woo Hoo, what a ride!"

So far, it's been quite a ride. The only question is, what's next?"