

# Career Advancement: MARAD Has a Story to Tell of Good Jobs, Work-Life Balance



Ann Phillips, administrator of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration. *Brett Davis*  
The Maritime Administration has a good story to tell, and Ann Phillips, the retired Navy admiral who runs MARAD, is seeking new ways to tell it.

"Not enough people know enough about the maritime ministry, and they don't know what opportunities are there for them," she said in an interview with Seapower at the Department of Transportation headquarters in Washington, D.C. "It's good paying jobs, good paying union jobs, good paying jobs with a career advancement opportunity."

MARAD, established in 1950, is the DOT agency responsible for the nation's waterborne transportation system, including supporting the technical aspects of ships and shipping, port and vessel operations and national security-related maritime transportation. It maintains a fleet of cargo ships in reserve to provide sealift surge capability in wartime and in case of national emergencies. Phillips was sworn in as administrator on May 16, 2022, after serving nearly 31 years in the U.S. Navy as a surface warfare officer.

Like its military brethren, the maritime industry faces challenges, such as an aging ships in the Ready Reserve Force (part of the wartime surge capability) and a shortage of Mariners. A few years ago, MARAD faced a shortage of an estimated 1,800 Mariners to be able to activate the full Ready Reserve Force for six months, such as might be required in wartime.

“And along came COVID, which made it worse for sure,” Phillips said. “People left because they weren’t guaranteed replacements. They left because they were stuck overseas. They left because they didn’t want to get COVID or they didn’t want to get involved in all the challenges of operating under those circumstances.”

Things are looking brighter. Enrollment is trending up at the MARAD-funded and owned Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York, as well as the six state academies in California, Michigan, Maine, Massachusetts, New York and Texas.

MARAD has a Student Incentive Program for the state academies, and Congress authorized doubling the incentive to \$64,000 over four years, which mostly covers student expenses. Upon graduation, officers become part of the Navy’s Strategic Sealift Officer Force, according to a description of the program published by the California State University Maritime Academy.

“This year we completely filled up all the slots for the Student Incentive Program for the first time in forever,” Phillips said. There was a question as to whether upping the funding would matter, but “it would appear the answer is yes, it will make a difference,” Phillips said with a laugh.

The academy at Kings Point has also been working hard on recruiting, she said, and has 300 students coming into the new freshman class, up from recent years.

“They have to get through the very arduous and rigorous curriculum at Kings Point. But, that’s a success,” Phillips said.

## **Improvements**

MARAD has made several improvements lately to continue to attract and retain recruits, both in terms of hardware and policy and standards.

It has developed a program to designate some qualified training entities as Centers of Excellence for Domestic Maritime Workforce Training and Education, a voluntary program intended to improve and support the workforce. As of earlier this year, 32 centers have been designated, including colleges and other facilities in 17 states and Guam.

“It’s not just credentialing Mariners, it’s also workforce development for maritime more broadly,” Phillips said. The designation gives the centers “bragging rights” but for the industry it helps tap into a broader set of potential industry members and provides “other opportunities to get the word about out about the maritime industry and what it can do for you.”

On the policy and standards side, MARAD has implemented EMBARC, which stands for Every Mariner Builds A Respectful Culture. The program was introduced by MARAD and the Merchant Marine Academy in December 2021. It lays out policies, programs, procedures and practices to help prevent and respond to sexual assault and harassment. The owners and operators of any vessel that embarks Merchant Marine Academy cadets on board must adopt the EMBARC standards, which include zero tolerance for sexual assault and harassment, eliminating barriers to reporting such incidents, supporting survivors, witnesses and bystanders who report incidents, among several others.

“Any vessel that is required to carry midshipmen, which is anybody receiving a payment under the maritime security program, tanker security, or cable fleet security program, plus our operators of Ready Reserve fleet vessels, all have to be a part of the program, or we may withhold their stipend, their payment,” Phillips said.

MARAD isn’t interested in withholding payments, but in ensuring the safety of Mariners at sea. Other ship operators that aren’t required to comply have been coming forward to do

so, Phillips said, meaning a “vast percentage of the U.S.-flag fleet” is now EMBARC compliant.

The program was underway before she became administrator, Phillips noted, “but to be able to take it from a program to a law in a year is almost unheard of. And it has made a difference. It has made a difference. Talking to midshipmen – we have a Midshipman Advisory Council now, we were tasked to put together at Kings Point – and they talk to me about how they feel EMBARC matters and has made a difference to them. Some of them have said, I don’t know a maritime industry without EMBARC.”

EMBARC and other quality-of-life improvements MARAD is making may help in recruiting women, who are not a large part of the commercial maritime industry to date. Phillips said 8% of the U.S. industry are women but just 2% globally.



Empire State, the first ship in the new National Security Multi-Mission Vessel program to build state-of-the-art training ships for the Merchant Marine academies. *Philly Shipyard*

“There are not many women in the industry, broadly. And so, that’s a shortfall. Fifty percent of our country’s population, roughly, are women, and yet 8% of the industry is women. We know this from the Navy, you’ve got to get to a critical mass. And once you do, everything becomes more straightforward because the novelty is gone, right?” Phillips said. “And so, we’re not yet there in maritime, but if we want to, if we want to grow our Mariner pool [but] we’re missing half the people in the country, then well, that’s an obvious place to look. And if you want to make people feel safe at sea, that applies to everybody. That’s just not women. That’s Mariners broadly. So, all of that comes together in EMBARC.”

## **NSMV**

There is also a strong new hardware push, namely getting

MARAD's new National Security Multi-Mission Vessels, or NSMVs, out to the training academies to replace the older National Defense Reserve Fleet ships now in use. A model of an NSMV sat in the middle of the table in the MARAD office where we spoke.

"New York has theirs. She just took off on her summer cruise yesterday morning," Phillips said on June 11 of the ship, Empire State. "Massachusetts will be getting theirs later this summer, Patriot State, and there's three more coming for the rest of the Maritime Academies. They are tremendous training vessels. It's much more modern than the ships that we've had. Although I cast no aspersions on steam vessels or the training vessels that the academies have been using, they have all served their purpose and served their country well ... but this is a state-of-the-art vessel."

The NSMV represents more than just a shiny new ship, Phillips said, it's also a boon to recruitment and retention. Students at all six of the state academies and the Merchant Marine Academy will have access to the ships, which can also be mobilized by the federal government if they are needed to respond to disasters or for humanitarian assistance.

"It makes a difference with young recruits," she said. "They don't want to see steam." The new ships also are a way to boost quality of life, as they give cadets a flexibility their forebears didn't have.

"I think the, the work-life balance piece matters now more than ever," Phillips said. "And we've seen, when I visit our Ready Reserve fleet ships – which of course are much older – and quality of life is, of course, challenged on an older vessel. But when I ask Mariners what they want, they want connectivity. They want internet, they want Starlink [satellite communications], they want be able to get on Instagram and talk to their kids. All these things that this can do, right?" she said, pointing to the NSMV model. "All these things that can do. But they want that. They want a gym.

They want good quality food.

“They just want to know you care about them.”

In addition to benefiting the training schools, the NSMV is helping bolster America’s shipbuilding industry, which suffers from a worker shortage and backed-up schedules. The NSMV ships are being built by Philly Shipyard under a firm fixed-price contract from TOTE Services LLC, the program’s vessel construction manager.

“Philly had 88 people on their rolls and now they have easily 1,400 people working on this,” Phillips said. “And we’ve been a part of that the whole way. Our small shipyard grant program helped provide them opportunities to get their very modest amounts of money to get their apprenticeship training up and running.”

The NSMV contract also enabled the shipyard to win other contracts, and now “they’ve got an order book and they’re off to the races ... that’s an example of how that can be done. So, let’s keep doing it,” she said.

### **The Flexibility of Maritime**

Merchant Marine Academy graduates also have unusual flexibility, in that they can commission with any of the military services if they choose.

“If you go to King’s Point, you ... graduate with your license, either third mate or third engineer, you graduate with a Naval Reserve Commission or perhaps an active-duty commission. You can do that too. And of course, you have your degree. So, you have an engineering degree, a license, and a military commission. The world is your oyster. You can do all kinds of things with that. You’re pretty much set for the rest of your life,” Phillips said.

She recounted a story from an academy graduate whose father

wanted her to go to the Naval Academy, as he was a Navy man.

“She said, no, daddy, I want to go to Kings Point, because then I can go to any of the services,” Phillips said. “And he admitted to me, yeah, she was right. In the end, she did not accept a commission, but she works for the Navy and she’s a port engineer for the Navy and handles naval vessels and using her King’s Point experience.”

Students can wait until their senior year to decide to join any of the other services.

“We’ve had Space Force commissions last year, I think two Coast Guard – lots of folks do that – but all services,” she said, noting their Merchant Marine background is still useful even if they go into another service.

“If they’re going to join the Navy with a Navy commission then they aren’t sailing U.S. flag, right? But they still come with that background. And I can tell you from personal experience, that’s a connection. ... One of the ships I was on, the supply officer was a Kings Point graduate. She could stand a bridge watch any day of the week. She had no problem. All of that was learned here. She done it. She had experiential learning. It was easy for her.”

Phillips said being a Merchant Mariner is simply a good job that not enough people know about, and most people don’t understand how much of their daily goods are shipped over water.

“They don’t realize how much of their goods are moved commercially on rivers or in coastwise trade. They just don’t really think about it,” Phillips said. Also, “people don’t think of it as an industry. They don’t think of it as an industry where they can have a long-term career.”

And a flexible career at that. Phillips said during her Navy years, “when I came back from deployment, if I had duty the

next day, it was like, oh, that's nice. You got back from deployment. You've been gone for eight months. Don't be late for watch. But when you're off in the industry, you're off. You can work six months a year. You can work nine months a year. It's up to you. You can do it in pieces. It depends on who you're sailing for and what your watch rotation is. But you get an excellent salary and you get excellent benefits ... if you're part of a labor union or with your company."

That flexibility means "you can manage your life in a different way," Phillips said. "And you can't do that in the military."

## **The Future**

Asked where she would like the maritime industry to be in five years, Phillips said she'd like to see the construction of more sealift and tanker security vessels, expanded capacity at the Kings Point academy and a congressional appropriation for a grant program to help expand the work of the Centers of Excellence.

"The Center of Excellence program has a grant program authorized, but not appropriated," Phillips said. "So, an appropriation there would help us work collaboratively across the selected centers of excellence institutions and give them the ability to build more capacity, to do more recruiting locally."

One goal she described as aspirational would be a collaboration across all the maritime stakeholders to create an advocacy program for Merchant Mariners to "get that word out there" about the good jobs the industry can provide.

The U.S. Marine Corps has had Super Bowl ads: Why not one for the Merchant Marine?

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