



# U.S. COAST GUARD



## Homeland Security

### Flag Voice 252

#### Quick Links

[Human Resources Home](#)

[Be a Part of the Coast Guard:](#)

»» [Military Careers](#)

»» [Civilian Opportunities](#)

»» [Learn about the Reserve](#)

»» [Coast Guard Academy](#)

[Flag Voice](#)

»» [Biography of the Assistant Commandant for Human Resources](#)

[Future Force](#)

[Contact Us](#)

#### TATTOO, BRANDING, AND PIERCING POLICY

Within the next few days, I will release an ALCOAST detailing significant changes to our current policies regarding tattoos, branding, piercing, and other forms of body art. I ask that senior leaders and command cadre make a special effort to ensure that this Flag Voice is widely disseminated to all levels of the organization. Please post it on the mess deck, reprint it in the plan of the day, or post it on the unit website so that all hands become familiar with its content as quickly as possible.

Our current policy on tattoos, branding, piercing, and other forms of body art has not changed appreciably over the past thirty years. Our standards date back to a time when tattooing was restricted to a very small portion of society, branding was almost unheard of, and piercing was limited to earlobes. Consequently, there was little practical need to spell out, in great detail, the dos and don'ts of body art. Clearly, times have changed. Tattooing has exploded in popularity and now touches all segments of our society. While branding remains far less popular, it is common in some social circles. As for piercing, one only needs to walk through the shopping mall or along the beach to see how much things have changed over the course of the last decade or so. These trends have gradually eased their way into our military workforce. However, given our role as a military service and as a federal law enforcement agency along with our level of daily contact with the general public, we cannot allow ourselves to be guided solely by social trends and fashion. Therefore, the time has come to recalibrate and affirm our standards for tattoos, branding, piercing, and other forms of body art that are consistent with the requirement to maintain a sharp, professional military image to the public we serve.

Our intent is not to draw undue attention to members of our team who already have tattoos or brands. Where appropriate, we have incorporated a grandfathering feature into certain aspects of the new policy that will apply to all current members for the remainder of their careers.

#### Tattoos:

When evaluating tattoos, we consider three factors - content, location, and quantity. Content is the subject of the tattoo. That is, what does the picture depict. We have long prohibited tattoos that depict racist, indecent, extremist, or lawless themes. This standard remains unchanged in the new policy and will not be grandfathered. Content issues are more common among new accessions vice those personnel already on active duty. For more than thirty years, the head, face, and neck have been off-limits to all forms of body marking. The new policy adds hands, below the wrist bone, to the list of off-limits areas. The intent of this change is to ensure that every member of the Coast Guard can appear in a service dress uniform without any visible tattoos. Again, those who currently have tattoos on their hands will be grandfathered. Quantity is the greatest area of change in the new policy. Each month, our recruiting offices are faced with a

#### Other Links

[Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#)

[Department of Transportation \(DOT\)](#)

[Coast Guard Retirees](#)

[Coast Guard News and Information](#)

[Military Locator](#)

growing number of applicants with near 100% coverage on their arms and/or legs. The new policy limits tattooing of exposed arms (between the elbow and wrist bone) and legs (between the knee and ankle bone) to not more than 25% of the area based on a visual approximation. Tattoos that involve complex murals or serpentine designs that dominate a given area shall be regarded as full coverage within the bound area. Any current service member who is at or exceeds the 25% limit is prohibited from adding to the tattooed area.

#### Branding:

Branding, a far less accepted form of body art, with unique medical concerns, will be far more restricted. No member may have more than one brand anywhere on their body. The brand may not exceed 4 inches in diameter. As with tattoos, brands may not appear on the head, neck, face, or hands.

#### Piercing:

Our policy regarding body piercing is also changing significantly. No piercings, other than those for earrings as described below, shall be made through the ear, nose, tongue, chin, eyebrow, or any other body part that would be visible while in any uniform. This prohibition applies to male and female members alike and is specifically intended to limit the less than military appearance associated with vacant holes in the face and other exposed areas of the body. Other piercings concealed by the uniform such as the navel or nipples are strongly discouraged due to the potential for infection and medical complications. Under no circumstance shall such concealed piercings and accompanying jewelry be visible through, or interfere with, the professional appearance of the member in uniform. Piercings in the ear shall not exceed two per ear lobe and shall be small and inconspicuous. Additional piercings in the ear lobes and cartilage are prohibited. Guidance regarding the wearing of earrings by women while in uniform, can be found in Uniform Regulations, COMDTINST M1020.6 (series). All members are prohibited from wearing forms of facial jewelry (other than earrings for women) while in uniform, on board a military installation, or while attending a command sponsored event. Those personnel with preexisting unauthorized piercings shall discontinue the use of those piercings to allow for eventual healing.

#### Body Mutilation and Dental Art:

The forthcoming policy will also address, to a lesser extent, body mutilation and dental art. Both of these forms of body art are prohibited and will not be grandfathered.

#### Questions and Answers:

Here are a few questions I thought might arise followed by associated answers. How will we measure 25%? How will we go about grandfathering those members who currently have excessive tattooing? What will happen if a future CO challenges the tattooing? Will documenting my tattoos prevent me from being considered for certain assignments? Let me take these one at a time. First, let me make one point very clear, we are not going to conduct "tattoo inspections". As stated earlier, we are not interested in drawing undue attention to those

members who have tattoos and/or brands. The 25% rule will be based on a visual approximation. Those personnel who currently have tattoos that meet or exceed the 25% rule (arms-elbow to wrist and legs-knee to ankle) will have their status documented in a standardized Administrative Remark (included in the instruction). New accessions with a borderline, but approved, amount of tattoos will have their case documented by the Recruiting Command to avoid the need for them to justify their approved status at their first unit. Once a questionable tattoo is approved and documented, it shall remain so throughout a member's Coast Guard career. Reevaluation by future commands is not required nor desired. As for assignment impacts, there are some jobs in the Coast Guard where excessive tattooing may make a member ineligible. It all depends on the degree of tattooing. These include recruiting duty, company commander duty in Cape May, Gold Badge Command Master Chief positions, and high visibility public/liason type duty. Other than these exceptions, tattoos/brands are not a factor in the assignment process.

Heavy tattooing found its way into our organization over time. It will take time to ease our way back to a more desirable state. For those personnel seeking to join our ranks in the coming months, this is going to be a big change and may result in some applicants being turned away. This is unavoidable. For those members already a part of team Coast Guard, this will have very little impact on our current workforce.

The forthcoming ALCOAST and instruction will provide greater detail. For those contemplating a tattoo or piercing in the near future, please fully considered the new policy before acting. My point of contact is CWO Joanne Stevens. She can be reached at (202) 267-2239 by phone or [jmstevens@uscg.mil](mailto:jmstevens@uscg.mil) by e-mail.

Regards,

*RADM Kenneth T. Venuto*  
Ken Venuto

This page is maintained by [HR Webmaster \(CG-1A\)](#)

[Coast Guard Home Page](#)

[Customer Accessibility](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

[Questions/comments about US Coast Guard](#)

Last modified: undefined NaN, NaN