

## SUNDAY FOCUS

# Volunteers keep local lifeboats afloat

## Two community boats patrol Indian Arm and Howe Sound

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THERE are 254 homes without road access scattered around Indian Arm and Burrard Inlet. Many are summer-only residences, but there are a minimum of 60 families who reach civilization by boat year round.

And while other residents of North Vancouver rest more easily in the knowledge that fire and ambulance services are only a 9-1-1 call away, these secluded water dwellers have only two hopes in the event of an emergency: their own resources or the Deep Cove Lifeboat.

"When you come to the end of the government dock those services finish. From here to the end of the inlet, we're it," says Coxswain Jimmy Watt, one of the early members of the North Shore Lifeboat Society (NSLS) which was incorporated in 1987.

Yet the society goes about its work in comparative anonymity. "They deserve a lot more recognition than they get, but the nature and the volume of the calls they get means not many people know what they do," says Tim Jones, search manager for North Shore Rescue.

"They're an essential element to land search operations up Indian Arm. Not only do they provide shore searches as necessary, they are our transportation to that shoulder of Mount Seymour."

Jones then switches hats to speak as the B.C. Ambulance unit chief responsible for stocking the lifeboat with its extensive first aid gear. "They are a totally under rated service. When Jimmy came on board the professionalism of that crew became absolute."

Bruce Falkins is currently secretary of the NSLS and has been with the society since it was formed in 1987 after the Provincial Emergency Program got out of the salt water rescue business. There are some 25 similar societies up and down the coast that are all part of Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary's marine presence on the water. All are staffed by CCGA-trained volunteers and all raise funds in their own community for capital and operating expenses.

The NSLS owns and operates three boats: the Deep Cove Lifeboat (see sidebar for specs); the Howe Sound Lifeboat — a rigid-hulled Zodiac based in Fisherman's Cove; and a spare whaler. That's \$385,000-worth of assets. Falkins says approximately 50 per cent of that money has come from provincially regulated charity gaming, while the remainder is provided by a variety of service and community organizations, charitable foundations and municipal grants (although West Vancouver District only began to contribute last year).

Canada-wide, the CCGA responds to approximately 25 per cent of the 7,000 marine SAR incidents recorded annually. Falkins says that figure is closer to 38 per cent on the B.C. coast.

"One of the largest misconceptions in the minds of the public," says Watt, "is that we are funded by the federal government. We are not. We are volunteers running a community-owned boat."

"The assumption is we are paid by the Canadian Coast Guard but we rarely get more than a handshake from the rescued and sometimes not even that."

According to the CCGA Web site, auxiliaries are only reimbursed for out of pocket expenses (fuel costs only) when tasked to a SAR mission. The government of Canada receives the equivalent of \$30 in services from the CCGA for every dollar actually spent. In other words, CCGA members save Canadian taxpayers millions by providing services at a fraction of the cost of maintaining the same number of Coast Guard units at the ready.

If a local boat puts out a Mayday call it will be picked up or forwarded to the Victoria Joint Canadian Rescue Co-ordination Centre. The centre is responsible for the planning, co-ordination, conduct and control of SAR operations and directs the closest and most appropriate search and rescue resources to a distress call. The centre, and others like it, are staffed by SAR co-ordinators from the Canadian Military and the Canadian Coast Guard. They are on full alert 24 hours a day, seven days a week, year round.

Says the CCGA Web site: "The most important reason for a voluntary service is efficiency. Each CCGA unit attracts a number of the most able and active members of the community. Their



NEWS photo Terry Peters

**BOATERS in difficulties on the water will be pleased to meet NSLS crew members: Leigh Farrell (clockwise from front left), Jimmy Watt, Cliff Jones, David Rees-Thomas, Leeann Kaufmann, Michelle Blaksic, Mike Young, Robin Overbye and Ben Weinberger.**



NEWS photo Terry Peters

**THE Deep Cove Lifeboat (left) and the Howe Sound Lifeboat on a combined training exercise in Indian Arm recently. Both boats are operated by volunteers of the North Shore Lifeboat Society as part of the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary.**

time, expertise and local knowledge cannot be bought."

That statement is true as far as it goes, but Falkins says for every 10 new members the NSLS attracts "we'll be fortunate if we have two left after a year." The society has only about 15 members at the moment, although there are trained crew members who are not members of the society.

"An awful lot of crew people think that it is a glamorous job and, quite frankly, it isn't. An awful lot of people don't think of it as work and, quite frankly, it is," says Falkins.

Each lifeboat requires a minimum of two crew to be operational and that means they have to be within 15 minutes of their boat at all times when on call — typically a week per month of 12-hour days or nights.

New members are often keen to complete the first aid, radio and SAR training (some have used the training as a free stepping stone to land-based emergency service careers in firefighting) in order to strap on a pager and wait for a rescue call. Emergency calls are classed as Code 2 (urgent) or Code 3 (emergency).

## Fast boat serves Deep Cove

**THE present Deep Cove lifeboat has been in commission for two years and is the third to be owned and operated by the Deep Cove Lifeboat Society (DCLS) since 1987.**

It was built to order for Parks Canada by Lifetimer Boats in Duncan, B.C. in 1989. The aluminum crewboat was to serve in the Queen Charlottes, as the *M/V Shearwater* and the contract order required that the boat: "must be smooth riding and dry in heavy chop to 3-4 foot seas. Very sea-kindly and safe in the most severe weather conditions."

The deep-V, flared-bow, 29-footer has a self-bailing deck, a beam of just over 11 feet and a draught of 2' 8".

The DCLS virtually rebuilt the boat when they acquired it a little over two years ago at a cost of \$70,000, adding a new seven-foot high pilothouse, a new generator and new wiring. The table and benches in the cabin were designed to convert to flat berths for two stretchers (the aft deck has room for three more).

The 7,560-lb. (3.78-ton) boat is capable of transporting up to eight persons with personal gear or an equivalent weight in freight for a combined total of 680 kg (1,500 lb.).

The Volvo diesel (KAMD 42) engine with its twin props is designed to cruise at 24 knots with a maximum speed of 30 knots — although Coxswain Robin Overbye says 32 knots might be possible.

Besides nautical charts covering Indian Arm, Howe Sound, Vancouver Harbour and its approaches, the boat carries topographical maps for Indian Arm and Howe Sound.

The radios on board are capable of monitoring all the emergency and working frequencies of police, fire, ambulance, North Shore Rescue and Coquitlam Search and Rescue.

Thanks to Coxswain Jimmy Watt's preparation, the lifeboat's logbook contains contact numbers for all local marinas, fuel barges and travel lifts.

All Indian Arm residences (with no road access) are listed with home location, names and contact numbers, dock/no dock access, if children reside there and how many, neighbour's phone number, etc. GPS co-ordinates are provided and a table of distances lists how long it will take to reach each location at cruising and emergency speeds.

The lifeboat is well equipped with marine rescue and firefighting equipment and is stocked by B.C. Ambulance with professional first aid gear.

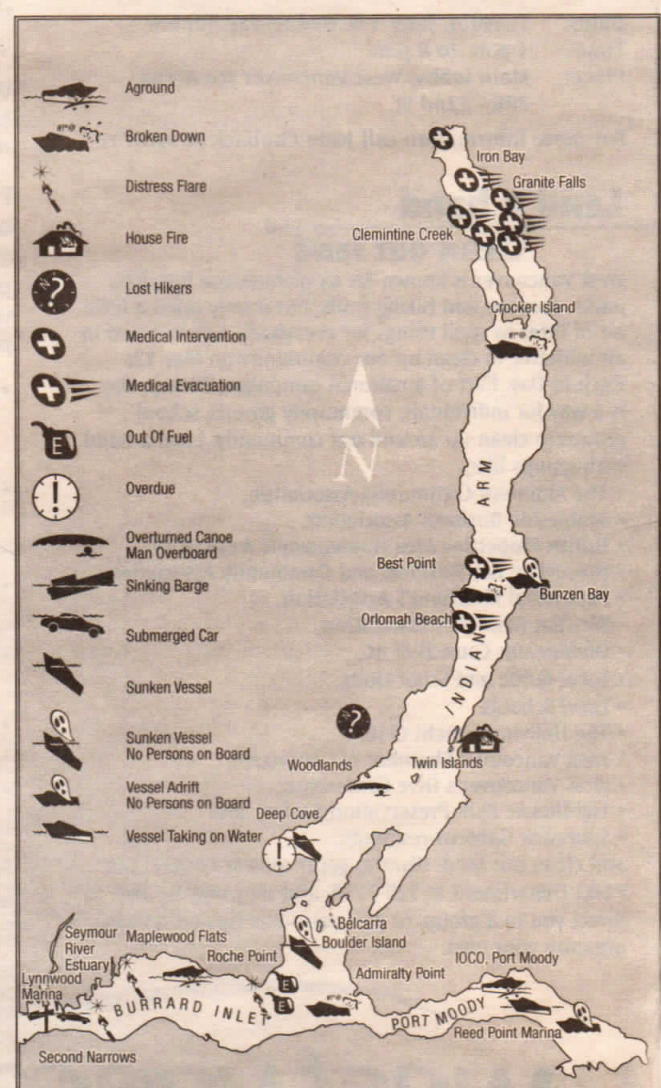
— Martin Millerchip

Urgent calls mean there is time to do a boat check at the dock before proceeding; Code 3 calls mean turn the key and go. That's when the months of training on local waters pay off says Deep Cove Lifeboat crew member Mike Young. "If you go ripping out of here in the pitch dark at 30 knots, you'd better know where you are and where the rocks are."

But recruits who join keen to participate in rescues often spend months waiting for their first call out. And waiting means no social or business engagements more than 15 minutes from the boat when on call. "What we do doesn't meet the expectation of most individuals but that's coast-wide, not just on the North Shore," says Falkins. "Monotony becomes an issue, then you can get three calls in a week that mean dropping everything and going at once. You don't even have time to blow out the candles on the cake."

"A major issue for us is daytime coverage. Very few employers are prepared to accept the type of behaviour where you can be at

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NEWS graphic Norisa Andersen

**SOME of the calls to which the Deep Cove Lifeboat has responded in the last year.**





NEWS photo Terry Peters

**COXSWAIN Robin Overbye says the Deep Cove Lifeboat was averaging about 49-55 call outs a year. That number has dropped a bit recently because the increasing boat activity in Indian Arm puts other helpers on the water.**

## 5,000 hours a year on standby

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your desk one minute, then gone in a flash."

Says Watt: "The ones who hang around are the older locals. We'll be here for ever."

Falkins, based on the Howe Sound Lifeboat, is not so sure. "I'm 49. My eyesight is not as good as it was and my back gets sore. I definitely have to look at whether I can be on the boat next year."

Watt says some of the core group not only spend over 5,000 hours a year on their pagers but are also doing everything else to keep the society and its boats running. "We are mechanics, carpenters, crew, fundraisers while we try and raise a family."

"My wife often asks why we are doing this all the time. There are times I've gone and come back in the night and my family doesn't even know until my son says 'Dad, you're in the North Shore News again.'"

"The one hour of the incident is the easiest time we have. It's the other things that wear on you."

Explains Falkins: "We have to do the casinos, the grant applications, the presentations to the service clubs. In many cases, you have very good mariners who are very poor fundraisers."

Despite their wish for more community support, all of the society members are proud of the job they do.

"In all the years I've been around (over 15) I don't think

we've had a call that we haven't been able to respond to. I think that's a pretty good record," says Watt.

*If you would like more infor-*

*mation on the NSLS call Mike at 929-0599 (for the Deep Cove Lifeboat) or Shawn at 990-6950 (for the Howe Sound Lifeboat).*