

Outlook

WEST VANCOUVER

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REBECCA ALDOUS
STAFF REPORTER

Drizzle splats on Dugal Purdie's bright orange helmet. At 28 knots per hour (51 kilometres per hour) the rain drops have no chance to pool. Air charges past Purdie as the Coast Guard Auxiliary zodiac slices through the water off West Vancouver's shoreline.

Unit 1, which covers English Bay, waters around Bowen Island and the eastern portion of Howe Sound, is on its way to a downed Cessna. The auxiliary's latest recruit, Boudewijn Neijens, has mapped out the coordinates of the suspected crash. Beside him under a small canopy, West Van builder Chris Simpkins stands at the helm.

Whenever Unit 1 is called out it's because of bad news. The volunteers only get tasked if there is a threat to life or possible environmental disaster. And with the water temperature less than 10 degrees Celsius, minutes count. Without protective gear, such as the thick survival suits the Unit 1 team are wearing, the survival rate in the water is between 30 minutes to an hour. Top that off with weather conditions, such as relentless waves and strong currents, and one's chances quickly drop. On average approximately 400 Canadians will die in water-related fatalities per year, according to Canadian Safe Boating Council. All three of the men aboard the zodiac have fished lifeless bodies out of the sea.

"We've reached the target," Neijens yells.

Simpkins throttles back the gas on the twin 200 horsepower outboards. Purdie and Neijens throw a

Practice makes perfect

buoy with a flag on it over the side of the boat. It locates the initial site and allows the crew to follow the flow of currents.

"What kind of search should we do now?" Purdie asks Neijens.

After a few seconds and whispers from Simpkins, Neijens replies.

"A sector search."

Today is a training exercise. But the scenario is not a stretch. Last year the unit attended a float plane crash by Gibsons. It's events like that in which training is crucial. The West Van's Coast Guard Auxiliary's 26 members practise every week. The unit's current 16-year-old vessel needs three people to operate it. The boat is manned 24/7, with each member on alert one night per week and one weekend every five weeks.

"If you have three people that have got to be on-call, 26 members are not too many," says Purdie, the unit's station leader.

In fact, the unit needs more volunteers. The unit will take ownership of a new boat this year, a boat that's designed for four crew members.

"We'll need at least another 10 people," Simpkins

says.

Recruiting volunteers isn't easy. Members must live within 15 minutes of the unit's station in Fisherman's Cove. Training a new member takes up to a year, with courses leading up to the pinnacle in marine education with the Canadian Coast Guard's specialized Rigid Hull Inflatable Operator Training. The week-long program runs in fall and early spring. Six people are trained at a time on B.C.'s west coast out of Bamfield. The unit also faces the district's aging demographic. The majority of West Van's population is between the years 45 to 64.

"If you go North Vancouver and there is a bigger ring of potential recruits," Purdie says.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary has applied for moorage at the district's Horseshoe Bay Pier, a move Purdie says will broaden the unit's recruitment pool. The location is simply better suited for them, he says. It's easier and faster for members to get there, with one quick exit off the highway. As well, the majority of dispatches the unit receives are for emergencies in Howe Sound.

The potential move has gained attention. While the district reviews the auxiliary's request, the municipality has also ended an agreement with the pier's long-time watchdog Billy Lord. The auxiliary has the support of the Horseshoe Bay Business Association and the Western Residents' Association, but some of the pier's users fear the loss of a full-time keeper could lead to traffic problems.

Unit members may not be at the pier 24/7, but likely would be on or around the dock for large chunks of time, Purdie says. It's a great opportunity for the auxiliary and will help them gain exposure,

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Outlook



(From left) Dugal Purdie throws a marker overboard. Chris Simpkins checks the vessel's lights. Simpkins steers the course at the helm. Dugal holds on tight as the boat races to its target. Boudewijn Neijens signs in for duty.

Rebecca Aldous photos

Purdie adds.

The 57 auxiliary units along Pacific coast are responsible for more than 29,500 square kilometres, including some of the most rugged coastline in the world. Because units are only reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses when tasked with search and rescue

missions, Ottawa receives the equivalent of \$30 in service from the units for every dollar spent.

"You don't have time to get nervous."

Boudewijn Neijens
Coast Guard Auxiliary

Ultimately the auxiliary save Canadian taxpayers millions of dollars. Yet they need the public's support to maintain and operate the auxiliary's combined asset value of more than \$215 million.

The West Van unit's new boat costs \$520,000, \$400,000 of which was donated by corporations and residents.

"If we didn't have [the public's support] we won't be able to afford to do the training and we wouldn't be able to afford to get the equipment," Purdie says. "This would put people's lives at risk."

The recent royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton helped spotlight the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary's work. The couple picked the volunteer organization as a beneficiary of a special charitable fund set up to celebrate the wedding. The auxiliary received \$50,000. Purdie hopes a new home in a more public location will carry that momentum forward.

In the last 12 months, Unit 1 has been called out 38 times. Neijens' first search and rescue operation was in March of this year. The unit raced to Lions Bay when residents of Sunset Beach reported a man yelling in the water just before midnight. After 30 minutes of searching, Neijens saw the tip of the man's feet and his nose on the crest of a wave.

The man wasn't wearing a life jacket and strong winds swept him away from the shore. The crew hauled him from the water and performed CPR. The man was later pronounced dead.

"You don't have time to get nervous," Neijens says. "I was just remembering the search patterns and how to look for small objects in the water. Only afterward does it hit you."

Although the number of people fishing in local waters has dropped, there are more people enjoying water-

based activities, such as kayaking, diving and kiteboarding, Purdie says.

Spring and fall are the busiest seasons for the auxiliary. That's when people start to head out, but there are also fewer vessels on the sea to come to one's rescue, Purdie says as the zodiac bobs on a lonely patch of calm ocean by Bowen Island. The ferry has just passed and a Canadian navy vessel is steadily churning up the sound.

Purdie looks at a beam of sunlight that's piercing through the dark, grey clouds, lighting a patch of water in the Strait of Georgia. There are some difficult moments that come with the position, he says, but also some beautiful ones.

The crew heads to Snug Cove to practise docking. As the giant motors spit up a rooster's tail, Purdie unclips a bright yellow bag of coiled rope from the side of the boat. He throws it into the ocean with a smile.

"Man overboard," he yells to Simpkins and Neijens. Practice makes perfect.

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