

Volunteer saviours

BY JEN ST. DENIS, NORTH SHORE NEWS JUNE 10, 2012 10:20 AM



Dugal Purdie, Dan Sampson, Peter Matthews and Ian Grantham sit in comfort aboard the new vessel. In the old boats, which were only partially enclosed, two crew members had to ride standing up at the back of the vessel in the open.

Photograph by: NEWS photo, Cindy Goodman

THEY'RE called out late at night and in all weather. They respond when a boater has gone aground, run out of fuel, or gotten lost. They're there when lives are at risk, to search risky ocean waters, give CPR and first aid, and even perform the grim task of retrieving bodies.

They do all this, and they do it for free. Once known as the Coast Guard Auxiliary, the volunteers who perform search and rescue missions along B.C.'s 27,000 kilometrelong coast have a new name they hope will earn them more recognition and help with fundraising.

"One of our biggest difficulties was we were always in the public's mind part of the Canadian Coast Guard, and they thought we were publicly funded," said Dugal Purdie, station leader of the West Vancouver society (known as Station 1). "As long as that association was there, it really hindered us with our fundraising efforts."

Now known as the Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue, the organization hopes the confusion will end.

The North and West Vancouver societies went out on a combined 62 missions in 2011. Calls spike in the summer and on weekends, when pleasure boaters go out to explore the rugged coastline and small islands in Burrard Inlet, Indian Arm and Howe Sound.

Purdie and Randy Strandt, president of the RCM-SAR and leader of the North Vancouver society, both remember dramatic rescues.

Purdie recalled being called out on Thanksgiving Day in 2007 to search for a group of kayakers who had been caught in bad weather. Waves of up to two metres high had overturned two double kayaks.

"Of the six people, four were brought back safely and two didn't make it," said Purdie. "We found the two, but they didn't recover."

Strandt told of a 1999 accident off Point Atkinson during the fireworks festival, when a barge collided with a large pleasure boat. Of the 14 people on board the yacht, five died.

"We were there doing CPR on three of the victims, trying to revive them," said Strandt. "That sticks with you a little bit, because it wasn't successful."

That the work can be dangerous struck home last weekend, when two RCM-SAR volunteers from Sechelt died in a training accident. It's the first time in the history of the society that members have died while on duty.

"We're truly in a state of shock, just devastated and in disbelief," said Strandt, adding that members of the organization are a closeknit group who often train together.

"Right now our priority is on looking after the families of these women."

Four RCM-SAR volunteers were travelling through the dangerous Skookumchuck rapids on the Sunshine Coast when their inflatable boat overturned. Two were rescued by another RCM-SAR boat that had been following behind the first vessel. But Angie Nemeth, 43, and Beatrice Sorensen, 51, were trapped underneath the craft and didn't make it out.

Strandt said Transport Canada and the Coast Guard will do a joint investigation of the accident. The Sechelt volunteers who were on the scene will also go through counselling sessions provided by the Coast Guard.

"We know that search and rescue has inherent risks, but we believe training and (safety) processes mitigate those risks," said Strandt.

The volunteer society works closely with the coast guard. But in the future, the West and North Vancouver stations expect to be doing more rescues, and may be on their own more often. That's because the federal government has decided to close the Canadian Coast Guard base at Kitsilano to save money.

"I don't know exactly how many (more calls) or how that's going to work, but I think we would certainly be seeing more call volume as a result," said Strandt.

Given the choice, Strandt would rather see more boats on the water, but he said the RCM-SAR will not be actively lobbying the federal government to keep the Kitsilano station open. (The coast guard base at Sea Island in Richmond will continue to operate.)

"We're in an awkward position," said Strandt "We're partners with the coast guard, including the management . . . we feel like we're in the middle of it a little bit, to be honest. We're trying to be as supportive as we can of the station and their members."

Purdie said the community-based volunteer societies would continue to do what they have done for 100 years: fill the gaps left by a limited number of coast guard stations on B.C.'s coast.

"The reason this organization came into existence was because local communities had to be self-sufficient, because the coast guard wasn't there," said Purdie.

On May 26, the RCM-SAR unveiled its new logo at the Horseshoe Bay pier. The event was also a chance to show off the West Vancouver society's latest purchase, a bright yellow state-of-the-art rescue boat, capable of turning on a dime and reaching speeds of 40 knots (about 64 kilometres per hour).

At a cost of \$500,000, the new vessel is also an illustration of the ongoing need to raise funds.

The 10 metre-long boat improves safety for the crew and for those needing to be rescued. It can right itself if it flips over in rough seas, and has two stretcher bays and life-saving equipment like defibrillators and a warm air system for treating hypothermia.

RCM-SAR stations up and down the coast have been purchasing the same type of rescue vessel in an effort to standardize their fleet. The new ships replace boats that were only partially enclosed.

"In our old boat you get two people under cover and the other two crew members would be standing outside," said Purdie. "In the middle of winter, in the freezing rain, it's very difficult to be able to do a good search if you're cold and wet."

While 80 per cent of the cost of the ship was funded by a donation from the TK Foundation and 20 per cent came from a community gaming grant from the province, Purdie is still looking for \$25,000 to fully equip the boat. With light-weight life jackets that cost \$300 a pop and \$180 helmets, as well as safety harnesses, stretchers, spine boards and night-vision goggles, any little bit helps.

"If (people are) willing to donate for a life jacket, that would be just great," said Purdie. "There's so much we're still pulling together for the boat."

Purdie hopes the new name will not only help with fundraising, but give the volunteers the recognition they deserve.

"Every time we were involved in a rescue situation, almost without fail, the press would report it as the coast guard," said Purdie. "So all these volunteers who put so much time and effort into providing the service were usually going without recognition."

As for the 'royal' in the new name, the society was pleasantly surprised when their application for the designation was granted in just four months instead of the usual two years.

"We assume it's because members of the Royal family work in the search and rescue business, and they are big supporters of the British RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution)," said Purdie.

This is extreme volunteering, requiring a long-term commitment. Team members must train for two years to become "a valuable crew member," said Purdie. They take turns being on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and need to live within a 15-minute drive of their community's rescue station. Volunteers also spend from two to five hours a week doing maintenance or training.

Members come from all walks of life. The North Shore societies include doctors, entrepreneurs, building contractors, mechanics, accountants and construction workers. Some members are already avid boaters; others have little seagoing experience.

The North and West Vancouver stations once operated under one society, which was responsible for raising money for both stations. This year the stations will be splitting off and forming their own society. Each will be responsible for finding funds for their station.

Strandt said the change won't affect North Vancouver's ability to fundraise, even though West Vancouver is the wealthier community.

"The North Shore, community-wise, is pretty supportive of charities, so we're fairly confident there's enough here for both stations," said Strandt.

In February, West Vancouver members teamed up to fix up a new station house at the end of the Horseshoe Bay pier. After a two-year process, the District of West Vancouver had agreed to let Station 1 use the municipal pier and a dilapidated government warehouse at the end of it. Previously, the West Vancouver society had been headquartered at Fisherman's Cove, storing their equipment in a garden shed on the West Vancouver Yacht Club's parking lot.

The society had to put a new roof on the building, replace the floor and drywall the interior walls.

"One of our members is a roofing contractor," said Purdie. "He oversaw the work and paid for all the roofing material."

The trim white building with a red roof now sits at the end of the pier, emblazoned with the new RCM-SAR logo.

Although the hours are long and the work is hard, it's clear the North Shore volunteers get something special out of belonging to the search and rescue societies.

"You train together, you work together, you do it for free, so all you really have is that camaraderie," said Strandt. "You'll see that in all the stations."

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