

Coast guard of vital importance to mariners



By Bowen Island Undercurrent
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Saturday, May 25, saw a number of search and rescue vessels patrol the waters of the Howe Sound. The area was divided into grids and rescue maneuvers were conducted. As this was a training exercise, it was dummies that were pulled from the water, not bodies. Maria Steernberg documented the event as photographer for Sea Snaps and she believes that trained search and rescue teams are of vital importance to local mariners and should be the first to be contacted in case of an emergency.

Steernberg speaks from experience as she has operated Sea Snaps for 30 years. "The members of the coast guard, they truly are our angels," she said, adding that the first call in a dicey situation should always go to them through the VHG channel 16.

Eight Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue (RCM-SAR) teams from the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island participated in several mock scenarios, designed to test emergency response, first aid, seamanship, communications and navigation skills. "The search and rescue exercise last weekend was the biggest annual gathering of the RCM-SAR fleet and the third annual SAR held in the Lower Mainland," Steernberg said, adding that police marine units and other public safety agencies were also on site.

"These teams are saving lives on the water, 24/7, 365 days a year. The crews risk their lives to save others and are often the first responders to marine emergencies like vessel collisions, boating emergencies such as fires, sinkings or mechanical problems, missing persons and medical evacuations," Steernberg said, adding that basic knowledge about what to do first, how to safely tow a boat and pull someone from the water is essential for mariners.

Steernberg says she was reminded of a recent incident just off the coast of Bowen Island. An emergency call was received at a local marina and, rather than notifying the coast guard, a team of islanders went to help.

"Luckily, there was an experienced mariner within minutes away, who also heard the frantic call," Steernberg said, adding that there was no happy ending to that story as the boater died at the scene.

"The first thing you do is contact the coast guard before you leave to assist. This is proper marine protocol," she said. "With 40 years of personal experience on the water, I have witnessed many Pan Pans turn into a May Days, even with qualified and experienced mariners nearby. On the water, there is very little room for error." Steernberg explained that Pan Pans are calls for rescue when life is not in danger, but May Days involve life-threatening situations.

Steernberg said that she has been at around 20 different May Day sites and witnessed three heart attacks out on the water. She was glad to learn that all search and rescue boats now carry defibrillators on board. RCM-SAR volunteer crews provide round-the-clock marine search and rescue coverage in more than 40 communities in British Columbia and Steernberg learned that they responded to more than 700 missions in the past year.

One of the highlights of the presentation was Mister Bobbie, the safety boat, and Steernberg took the opportunity to invite him to attend Steamship Days, the festival planned by the Bowen Island Chamber of Commerce for July 10 to 14. "Mister Bobbie talks and blinks his eyes," Steernberg explains, adding that he will be the highlight for the children if his appearance at Steamship Days is confirmed.

Steernberg firmly believes that the coast guard's services are invaluable and added, "If we don't support them, there is a chance that we'll lose them."

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