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Ocean Crews

By Ann Green

In late spring at North Carolina's Kitty Hawk beach, swimmers in black wetsuits plunge into the cold water of the Atlantic Ocean. Throughout the morning, they practice a variety of rescue skills, including recognizing, retrieving and stabilizing victims. They also communicate with emergency responders. These exercises are part of the ocean rescue training for the Kitty Hawk Fire Department on the Outer Banks.



"On many North Carolina beaches, the lifeguards are part of the fire departments," says Sandy Sanderson, Dare County's emergency management director. "When emergency calls go out from the beach, usually both the fire department and rescue team respond. The fire department often provides backup if someone from the rescue team is in the water."

These lifeguards must train for a variety of emergencies—from swimmers in distress near the shore to boaters in trouble up to 600 yards offshore.

"Lifeguards have to deal with whatever happens," says Cole Yeatts, ocean rescue director of the Kitty Hawk Fire Department. "The ocean can be as sweet as a loving mother or as vicious as a rabid dog. A lot of people fail to realize the real dangers."

In open waters across the United States, lifeguards made more than 29,000 rescues in 2004, according to the U.S. Lifesaving Association (USLA), which compiles statistics from its affiliated lifeguard agencies. Because of the treacherous waters along the Outer Banks, Kitty Hawk ocean rescuers must be in top physical shape, capable of swimming 500 meters in 10 minutes and completing the U.S. Lifesaving Advanced Agency training as well as emergency medical training.

"This preseason training is to hone lifeguarding skills for the anticipated rescues during the season," says Yeatts. "Also, we train twice a week during the season to keep our skills sharp. I want my guards to act as a well-oiled machine so victims can count on us."

When hiring new lifeguards, Yeatts looks for more than just a good swimmer. Finding mature, outgoing people who have a desire to help

others is an added bonus.

“Lifeguards need a background in emergency services and training and how to deal with a crisis,” he says. “Since I have been a fire captain and ocean rescue director, I know the importance of these different experiences.

“The mean age for our lifeguards is 30. Our lifeguards have an average of seven years of ocean rescue experience.”

FIREFIGHTERS’ DUAL ROLES

Many lifeguards also work as firefighters in the winter, but focus on the beach in the summer, while others are onboard only for the summer, spending the off-season in other jobs.

“It is nice to have a variety,” says Sheri McCloud, who works full time for the Kitty Hawk Fire Department and has guarded the beach for 11 years. “Firefighting has so many specialties. Ocean rescue is just one of them.

“I love the challenge and maintaining my fitness level. All of it is educational. My top job as a lifeguard is educating the public. We are preventive lifeguards, and after that reactive lifeguards.”

One of the greatest challenges for ocean rescuers is learning how to spot the rip currents that occur along the ocean shorelines as well as along the shores of the Great Lakes, according to Spencer Rogers, a coastal erosion specialist with the North Carolina Sea Grant. Rip currents are powerful, channeled currents of water flowing away from shore. They typically form from breaks in sandbars, and also near structures such as jetties and piers. Rip currents rank as the primary cause of problems for swimmers, according to the USLA. In 2004, the USLA reported more than 17,000 rescues involving rip currents. The second-highest cause of ocean rescue accidents is rough surf, necessitating more than 4,000 rescues in 2004.

Accidents and injuries at beaches can be every bit as serious as the incidents faced by traditional first responders working inland. Yeatts says that he sees a lot of spinal injuries from playing in shallow water or inshore breaks, adding that people shouldn’t surf or body surf in inshore breaks—those close to land.

Drownings, clearly, are always a serious concern, and can even occur on calm days, according to Yeatts, when a “west wind is blowing, and the ocean looks like a lake.

“People get a false sense of security, and they fail to realize that a west wind can blow them out to sea,” he says. “The edges of a raft or boat act as a sail, which blows them offshore.”

The victims are then left with the choice of staying with their flotation devices or attempting to swim to shore.

“People should not underestimate the distance to shore or overestimate their swimming abilities,” he says. “They should never leave their flotation devices. Kitty Hawk Ocean Rescue has made many

rescues for people who are on rafts and could not get back in.”

Like many fire departments, ocean rescue teams also respond to a lot of medical emergencies on the beach—from cardiac arrest to heat exhaustion.

To rescue victims, personal watercraft (PWC) and buoys have become standard rescue equipment at North Carolina beaches. Ocean rescue services also use ATVs, 4x4 vehicles, trucks equipped with medical supplies, spinal immobilization equipment, automatic external defibrillators, oxygen supplies, backboards, marking floats, a global positioning system and other devices.

A few years ago, Kitty Hawk developed a rescue board for a standup PWC.

“The Jet Ski is a great piece of rescue equipment,” says Yeatts. “It sure beats the old surf boats.”

At Wrightsville Beach, the ocean rescue staff uses a PWC with a rescue sled that is designed for surf rescues.

“Team training is critical in maintaining your proficiencies in any surf rescue situation,” says Dave Baker, director of the Wrightsville Beach Fire Department’s Ocean Rescue Service. “Using a PWC or motorized craft in a rescue takes true professionalism. The Wrightsville Beach Ocean Rescue staff trains for the worse, plans for the best and expects the unexpected.”

For rescues farther out and searches for bodies, the U.S. Coast Guard assists the rescue team by supplying boats, airplanes and helicopters. In North Carolina, the Coast Guard participates in joint training with numerous rescue organizations. At the Kitty Hawk Fire Department for example, the Coast Guard and rescue team conduct a training session before each beach season kicks into high gear. For the training session, the Coast Guard brings in a helicopter with a stainless-steel rescue basket and boats. The rescue team practices towing someone toward the rescue site and lifting the person into the basket, which is then lifted by a mechanic into the helicopter.

“The training is as good as you can get,” says Yeatts. “It puts all of our training together and allows our lifeguards to understand the chain of events of a real rescue, equipment and practices used, as well as the opportunity to work with the Coast Guard who assists us in rescues. This training is invaluable in making real-life rescues an efficient operation.”

In fact, the Kitty Hawk Fire Department’s training is so well-respected that it has become a model for other programs.

“We provide ocean water training for the Secret Service,” says Yeatts. “The agents learn the same skills as our lifeguards. It is positive for them and gives us an opportunity to share our knowledge.”

EARLY LAFESAVING SERVICES

Lifesaving efforts began in the U.S. in the early 1700s, when dories were launched from shore to save victims of shipwrecks. During the late

1800s, the U.S. Lifesaving Service built stations across the United States, including seven along the Outer Banks. In all, 29 stations were built along the North Carolina coast, including the Pea Island station on the northern Outer Banks, which had the only all-African American crew.

Like other emergency responders, the lifesavers worked long hours with daily drills and foot patrols throughout the night. However, when someone cried “ship ashore,” the boredom ended. The rescuers used breeches buoys and lifeboats to bring the crews and passengers to shore. Throughout the country, the Lifesaving Service became the modern-day Coast Guard, while a new type of lifeguard emerged along the beaches.

Unlike the pool environments—which are all virtually identical—open-water beaches (including sounds) and their related hazards vary dramatically from place to place. Crowded conditions, water currents, dangerous sea creatures, weather and many other factors contribute to these variations.

By the middle of the 20th century, more beaches began putting up lifeguard stands. During the 1950s, the lifeguard team at Wrightsville Beach was the town’s first responder in a beach emergency and also performed a little bit of law enforcement as well, according to William J. Martin in the Aug. 19, 2004, issue of *Lumina News*, published in Wrightsville Beach, N.C.

“We did not have paramedics or anything,” Martin said in the article. “We took Red Cross courses, and then we would get instructions from the police department. For a while, we were carrying handcuffs for when we had to occasionally control individuals that would come down on the weekend, have a little fun and sometimes get out of hand. We would handcuff them until the police could come.”

MODERN RESCUE TEAMS

In 2004, the town of Wrightsville Beach moved the rescue team from the police department to the fire department.

“Officials realized that the lifeguards were a rescue team and not a policing force,” says Baker, who oversees a team of 26 lifeguards. Each day on Wrightsville Beach, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, 17 lifeguards are on duty, watching out for an average of 8,000 beachgoers per day, according to Baker.

“We have wall-to-wall bodies,” he says. “The density is something else.”

Like other firefighting units whose daily duties are often grossly embellished to make for exciting television, a typical day for a lifeguard isn’t as glamorous as on the old television series *Baywatch*, according to Yeatts. And, despite the intense training and sophisticated equipment, he says lifesaving is still the rescuer versus the ocean.

“It is so pure—fins, buoys and saving people’s lives,” he says. “We don’t have drownings every day. It is real life and real emergencies.”

