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PENINSULA NEWS REVIEW

Saving souls at sea

By Christine van Reeuyk - Peninsula News Review

Published: February 23, 2010 1:00 PM

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When he retired, Paul Larkin moved across the road from the auxiliary unit's Sidney site on Harbour Road.

"I'm a retired banker. Needless to say it wasn't an entirely exciting career as far as adrenaline," said Larkin, who goes out on sometimes stormy nights with the local auxiliary coast guard unit and is a director with the Saanich Marine Rescue Society.

Members of the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary Unit 36 are on standby 24 hours a day all days of the year, prepared for when things go awry for boaters in local waters. The life-saving work, often in dangerous situations and damaging weather, is all done by volunteers.

The unit, which started in 1979, earned the 2010 Hearts of the Community award for community service or project by a group. Hearts of the Community Awards, sponsored by the Peninsula News Review and Beacon Community Service, were handed out during an event Feb. 17 in the Charlie White Theatre.

Vern Totten, said marine rescue is a natural venue for volunteering.

"I've been involved in boating for many years," said Totten, president of the Saanich Marine Rescue Society, who was raised in Campbell River and kept a boat moored during adulthood at Point Roberts. "On the same slip that I was on, there was a Coast Guard Auxiliary Unit," he explained. "These guys arrive on scene and jump in ... (I thought) 'They're so well trained, they're so well organized and I think I want to be a part of that.'"

When he retired to Sidney that opportunity arose.

"Number one, I'm a boater, and number two, no matter how skilled you are, sometimes a rock comes up from the bottom, logs drift across your bow, and any of us can get in trouble at any time," said Totten.

"I do it for a little bit different reasons than Vern. I'm not a mariner," Larkin said. "I firmly believe when you retire you still need to generate your brain cells. I'm committed to learning and this is exciting stuff to learn."



Members of the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary Unit 36 are on standby 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Christine van Reeuyk/News Staff

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Each member is fully qualified to operate a marine vessel and train in search and rescue techniques, marine navigation, radio communication and first aid.

"I was recruited and I thought it's a great way to learn something new. Then I got involved in the fundraising part of it as well. It's such a good group and do such good work in the community," Larkin said. "It keeps the mind stimulated and you meet a lot of nice people."

The rescue unit is funded through donations and grants to its Saanich Marine Rescue Society.

They operate two units, out of Sidney and Brentwood Bay, and are tasked by the Rescue Co-ordination Centre. In 2009 the unit had 53 missions, saved five people and assisted 27 others who were in danger. They also do work preserving property and in 2009 those efforts added up to about \$2.7 million worth.

"It's not all plucking people out of the water, there's some tough stuff to it too. But this is all volunteer work," Totten said. "It's just a sense of giving back. It's not all about you. It's about helping others. It never fails, the more you help others, the more you get. Because we're a non-profit society, we rely heavily on donations from the public. I'm a firm believer that if you want to get something you've got to give something."

Peninsula residents may also recognize the faces of the volunteers from their time on the water providing a safety net for fun events like the Sidney Days Slegg build a boat race and the Christmas lighted sailpast.

Learn more about the group online (or donate to the cause) at www.marinerescue.org.

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