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SMITH POINT Sea Rescue

by Ann DeMuth

At dusk on a chilly November day, a boat heading from Smith Point to Reedville hit a submerged piling and sank. Fortunately, a small part of the bow floated above water, and with lifejackets on, the grandfather aboard was able to tie his two children to himself and tether a line to the bow. A search party headed out at dark, but the family wasn't found until early morning, hypothermic, but still conscious. In Reedville, warm bathtubs were waiting; the grandfather and children were revived and saved with no injuries. This was the inspiration for the founding of the volunteer group Smith Point Sea Rescue, as was shared to me by the current president, Russ Bertino. The event happened in 1973, and afterwards, Dr. Robert E. Beatley, along with Wendel Haynie and others, using their own boats, joined together to ensure that boaters in the future would have assistance when needed.

Photos courtesy of Smith Point Sea Rescue

A majority of the volunteers do service on the water as captain or crew, while others work behind the scenes helping with the accounting or working on the website or Facebook page. Smith Point Sea Rescue is the only volunteer non-profit rescue group on the Chesapeake. It is a [501 (c)3] non-profit and is funded entirely by grants, fundraisers, and donations.

Smith Point Sea Rescue has grown and today has 45 active members and three official rescue boats. According to Russ Bertino, the membership spans a variety of backgrounds from carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and communication experts to retired military. "Many have owned boats in the past, and many have captained vessels of all kinds from battleships down to little fishing operations." A majority of the volunteers do service on the water as captain or crew, while others work behind the scenes helping with the accounting or working on the website or Facebook page. Smith Point Sea Rescue is the only volunteer non-profit rescue group on the Chesapeake. It is a [501 (c)3] non-profit and is funded entirely by grants, fundraisers, and donations.

The group undergoes a rigorous training program every six months and is kept up to speed when new equipment is added to any of the rescue boats. Rescue I, a 42' Provincial, a traditional Chesapeake deadrise design, has a lot of pulling power and excels in rough seas. Rescue II, a 19' Carolina Skiff, is great for getting towlines to boats that have gone aground in shallow water. Both boats reside in Reedville on Cockrell's Creek off the Great Wicomico River in a boathouse that has recently been condemned. This will be a focus for the next fundraiser. Rescue III, a 27' Blackfin with twin engines, is fast and can quickly get to disabled boaters. The boat was generously donated and then modified for rescue operations. It waits for calls in a donated slip at Olverson's Lodge Creek Marina in Lottsburg off the Yeocomico River. The area covered by the three rescue vessels includes the Chesapeake Bay from Point Lookout to Windmill Point and the Potomac River from Ragged Point to the mouth of the river.

A captain and two crew members are assigned to Rescue I and Rescue III weekly and are on call 24/7. For night calls, another crew member is often added. They monitor VHF channel 16, are sometimes hailed by the Coast Guard, and also answer to 911 calls relayed by the sheriff's department. Their assistance may be needed for towing boats back to port, ungrounding a vessel, delivering fuel, providing jump starts, pumping out vessels taking on water, and moving disabled vessels.

Russ also explained, "The part of the Bay we cover is fraught with hazards. Mainly, hundreds and hundreds of crab pots. Many people get their props fouled in crab pots and become disabled. There are pound nets, which at nighttime, are almost

impossible to see. Many people run into them and get fouled up. There are also gill nets, which are sometimes only noted by a flag and a little buoy here and a flag and a little buoy over there and the net is in the water..."

Every call is unique, and crews find themselves responding to boats both large and small. Recently, a multi-million dollar sports yacht on the way from Portsmouth to Annapolis ran into problems with a split manifold. The 55' foot vessel was twice as high and much longer than the rescue boat, and at 50,000 pounds, it was quite a challenge to tow it back to Reedville and get it situated into a slip. One six hour mission found a crew in a bad storm where a 42' sailboat had tried to anchor in one of the worst possible places – in the mouth of the Potomac – where

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conflicting currents cause chaos. The woman aboard, who had recently inherited the boat, and her cat were towed to Reedville. It was heard later that another rescue crew in the Carolinas rescued the woman and the cat, but the boat didn't make it.

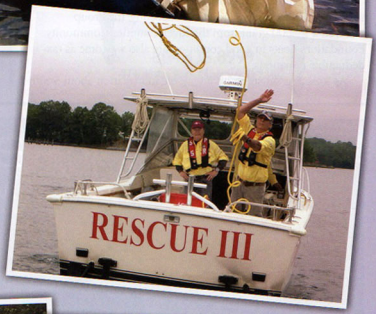
One heartfelt mission that Russ mentioned entailed a midnight trek to retrieve a crew member from a tugboat that was towing a barge up the Bay. A tragic accident had taken the life of a family member, and the crew member had to get home to his family. Fortunately, due to donations, Smith Point Sea Rescue is outfitted with AIS which identifies, locates, and tracks vessels, and Rescue I and the crew were able to hone in on the barge and pull alongside the tug, fighting the bow wave and prop wash, and retrieve the tug's crew member and get him home to his family in Reedville.

Russ added that Smith Point Sea Rescue also serves at various local functions and events. The group "participates with local institutions whenever ferrying passengers by water is required. An example would be the annual house tour sponsored by the Reedville Fisherman's Museum. SPSR offers a water route to many of the homes with a pier. Recently Rescue I was employed to assist the local YMCA to take underprivileged kids fishing."

A popular annual fundraiser to keep the organization afloat was born in 1983, according to Russ, when "it was recognized that we needed to have more resources. We wanted to purchase rescue boats that were capable of towing big vessels and getting out there quickly, so we started the Reedville Fishing Derby. It was the first major fishing tournament on the Chesapeake Bay. In its first year, it had over 500 boats. It was so popular that in subsequent years we had to limit it to 500 boats and then eventually we limited it to 300 boats. We just didn't have the resources to weigh all of the fish and do all the calculations. Fishing on the Chesapeake was a lot different back then. We had huge bluefish, up to 25 pounds, and we used to weigh hundreds and hundreds of fish. Some of the prizes were up to 5 and 6,000 dollars."

The fishing derby was a success for over 30 years, and then the fishing dropped off. The catches were less than spectacular, and the number of boats declined. An annual oyster roast, held on the first Saturday in March, became the sole fundraiser. While it's wildly successful, like the fishing derby, it's not fail-proof. In March of 2015, it had to be cancelled. Due to the harsh winter, the boats weren't able to break the ice and get to the oysters. By

SMITH POINT SEA


RESCUE III

SMITH POINT SEA RESCUE

2016, the oyster roast was back on track. Tickets are limited to 300, allowing an all-you-can-eat oyster feast. Bean soup, hot dogs, beer, and wine also add to the event which is usually a sell out.

Along with the oyster roast, Smith Point Sea Rescue is supported by donations and grants. Recently, the group received a $3,000 grant from the River Counties Community Foundation. Boats in good condition are also welcome as tax-deductible donations.

As Russ was finishing up giving me information about Smith Point Sea Rescue, he mentioned he was heading to the group's annual picnic. There are many ways to volunteer and be at next year's picnic, whether as captain or crew, or working behind the scenes. There are also many ways to support the group whether enjoying next spring's oyster roast or donating funds or even a boat to help rescue boaters in distress. Hopefully, you'll never need their assistance, but if you do, there's a crew of 45 waiting for your call. For more information, please see Smith Point Sea Rescue's website, www.smithpointsearescue.com, or Facebook page, www.facebook.com/SmithPointSeaRescue.