

## Lifeboats on the Fraser

# An ounce of prevention...

By Liisa Atva

During a commercial fishery opening on the Fraser River 300 gillnetters dot the water from Sandheads, at the mouth of the river, east to the Port Mann Bridge. Aboard a 12-metre gillnetter two fishermen are bent over their nets hauling in salmon. The sockeye are plentiful — offspring from a record run four years earlier. Visibility is good — it's a clear sunny, August day yet the fishermen seem startled when the *Steveston Lifeboat* comes up behind them and blasts its horn rapidly four times — code for larger vessel coming or “Pick up your nets.”

“Scotsman dead ahead!” shouts a Lifeboat crewman. The floating orange ball that marks the end of the gillnetter's net is in the middle of the shipping channel. Rapidly bearing down behind the Lifeboat is a container ship. The fishermen scramble and manage to tow their nets out of the way seconds before the ship passes. During an earlier 24-hour fishery, another gillnetter was not so lucky. A fully laden deep-sea ship sliced through its net, narrowly missing the boat and its crew.

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The *Steveston Lifeboat*, and its sister, the *Fraser Lifeboat*, are Canadian Lifeboat Institution (CLI) vessels. Founded in 1981, the CLI is a not-for-profit, volunteer organization funded by private and corporate donations. The crew, all volunteers, are trained to professional marine standards and include men and women from their 20s to post-retirement age.

The Fraser River is one of Canada's busiest waterways — tugs with barges of wood chips headed to the mill at Crofton, gravel from Texada Island, container ships, rail ferries, packer boats with prominent “Cash” signs buying fish, Fisheries and Oceans Canada boats, the Canadian Coast Guard hovercraft, a dredger clearing silt, whale-watching tour boats...and in the midst of all the commercial activity, sailboats, pleasure yachts, and kayakers. Increased activity during a commercial

fishery increases the risk of potential collisions for everyone.

The CLI participates in the FishSafe Safety Committee, a collaborative group of organizations working to help make the Fraser River a safer place. The Committee's goal is to provide all of the vessels traversing the Fraser with a better understanding of safe navigation, and hopefully, improve communication between them.

The south arm of the Fraser River is over a kilometer wide where it spills into the Straight of Georgia but the recommended channel for larger vessels is a 200-to-250 metre sliver. To prevent grounding, deep-sea ships and tugs with tows endeavor to stay on the “ranges.” The range markers on the Fraser are trapezoid boards painted red and white with fixed or flashing orange lights at night.

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*During the Sockeye Fisheries Open on the Fraser River (August & September 2014), the CLI attended to 21 incidents and undertook 105 commercial escorts for a total of 2,100 volunteer crew hours.*

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# CANADIAN LIFEBOAT INSTITUTE



The Steveston Lifeboat, built in Pearl Harbor in 1944, served as an Admiral's barge until 1958 when she was sold into private use and eventually came to British Columbia. Purchased in 1988, she was put into SAR service under the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary flag. In 1994, she started service with the CLI. Well-suited to her patrol and training roll, she continues to give great service, living up to the CLI motto — "The sea shall not have them."

Two or more range markers aligned indicates the centreline of the channel. To avoid collision, fishing vessels need to avoid setting their nets across the ranges. Unfortunately, not all do. The larger vessels and tugs attempt to weave their way through the nets but there is a limit to the degree they can zigzag.

With safety patrols and round-the-clock escort services during commercial and native salmon fishery openings not currently the mandate of any government-funded agency, the CLI has taken on this role. Their strategy is to sail up to a mile ahead of the tugs and ocean-going vessels to give early warning and ensure the channel is clear of nets, helping to prevent accidents before they happen.

Although the CLI is not a first-responder tasked to marine emergencies by the CCG — a role filled by other parties, including the Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue — they are considered a partner in search and rescue, assisting with incidents encountered while out on the water — 4,000 since inception. On several occasions, the CCG has been able to stand down since a CLI vessel was in the vicinity.

The CLI assisted 21 fishing vessels during this year's sockeye fisheries. In one incident, a gillnetter from Sechelt lost her steering and was drifting across the channel with a net full of fish. The *Steveston Lifeboat* towed the gillnetter out of the channel, waited while the fishermen hauled in their net laced with 160 sockeye and then towed the boat to the dock. The fishermen were disappointed with the catch but grateful for a tow.

Other incidents have included helping a gillnetter recover a net tangled in her propeller; assisting a lone fisherman, aboard a 40-foot fishing vessel with a broken fuel pump, in raising his 150-pound anchor against an ebb tide; and refloating and towing several gillnetters, grounded on the rocks near Garry Point.

As part of its continuing accident prevention program, the CLI is participating in the "Risk Assessment" process for the potential future movement of tanker traffic along the Fraser River. The *Fraser Lifeboat* was deployed to assist with the assessment conducted by Canadian and International



The Fraser Lifeboat, formerly named the Famous Grouse, is a 47-foot Tyne Class vessel purchased from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) in the U.K. Tyne Class Lifeboats were built for the RNLI and are self-righting. The hull design is particularly suited for operations where there is danger of hitting bottom or "tapping." Powered by two GM6V92TA turbo-charged V6 marine diesel engines, it has a top speed of 18 knots.

experts. The CLI also assists with safety patrols during herring roe fisheries in the Strait of Georgia, yacht races, safety education and, to the delight of the Steveston community, bringing Santa Claus to the Christmas celebrations.



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