

Opinion: Volunteers save lives in B.C., UK and Ireland

Boaters on troubled ships need your help

BY LIISA ATVA, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 17, 2014 8:37 PM



The question is: Who saves lives at sea here in British Columbia?

When the Kitsilano Coast Guard station closed in 2013, despite the protests against the decision to do so, I wondered what the impact on marine rescue would be. Not being a boater, my marine knowledge was limited — I'd assumed the only party involved in marine rescue was the Canadian Coast Guard. Then, out on the water in Steveston, I noticed the Canadian Lifeboat Institution's bright orange boats. How were they involved?

Founded in 1981, the Canadian Lifeboat Institution is modelled after the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) in the United Kingdom and Ireland. The admiration for the RNLI was evident when I recently visited Kinsale, a small town on the southern coast of Ireland. The town was still abuzz with the local RNLI's daring sea rescue the previous July, which had been broadcast on TV stations around the world.

The engines on the Astrid, a 42-metre-tall ship, had failed, and she had been driven onto the rocks by a strong southwesterly. The crew of 30, mostly teenagers on a training voyage, struggled to keep her from running aground. The

Irish Coast Guard dispatched two of its helicopters, but it was determined lifeboats would be needed it turned to the RNLI. Within 10 minutes of the call, the crew of the Kinsale RNLI lifeboat — all volunteers — were battling two-meter swells and five to six force winds, to rescue all 30 of the Astrid's crew, minutes before the ship sank.

Almost every lifeboat rescue in Ireland and the United Kingdom is undertaken by the RNLI, with the Coast Guard's role one of coordinating rather than executing. It is a testament to the high regard in which the RNLI is held that such an important role is left entirely to a civilian voluntary organization.

Who saves lives at sea here in British Columbia? In areas of federal responsibility, the Coast Guard is responsible for maritime search and rescue operations (SAR), with assistance from the Department of National Defence and the Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue (RCM-SAR), a volunteer organization. According to the Coast Guard website, "volunteer assistance is a key element in maximizing the efficiency of SAR operations, prevention and safety-related activities."

The RCM-SAR was formed in 1978 when various volunteer marine search and rescue groups created the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary. In 2012 the name was changed to reflect its distinct identity and avoid confusion with the Coast Guard. Although the RCM-SAR works closely with the Coast Guard, it is a separate, not-for-profit, volunteer organization, similar to the RNLI. Both are "first-responders" tasked to marine emergencies by the Coast Guard. The RNLI undertakes almost all lifeboat launches, the RCM-SAR about 1/3. However, the RNLI, founded in 1824, has had more than a 150-year head start.

With 236 stations and 4,600 volunteer crew members, the RNLI is a large organization, yet it is funded by legacies and private donations, not by government. The RNLI has a broad base of support ranging from the public to the British Royalty — the Queen is an official patron.

"Very few people refuse to donate when we put out our donation boat," said Kevin Gould, a deputy launch authority with the Kinsale station. With 42 stations and 1,000 volunteer crew members, the RCM-SAR is smaller in scale, although it covers a larger area of coastline. According to Rob Duffus, RCM-SAR's director of marketing, the Coast Guard contributes to mission and training costs, with station and equipment costs funded primarily by donations and gaming grants.

The Canadian Lifeboat Institution is a smaller, not-for-profit, volunteer organization funded entirely by private and corporate donations. In its early years, it was also a first responder, but with the RCM-SAR resourced and capably filling that role, the Lifeboat Institution carved out its own niche; providing safety patrols in the Fraser River and the Strait of Georgia, escort services for towboats and ships during commercial salmon and herring roe fisheries, assisting with boat races, safety education, involvement with FishSafe, and participating in SAR operations while out on the water.

"A lot of the work we do, the patrol work and escorts is accident prevention. If you can stop an accident from happening in the first place you're ahead of the game," said John Horton, Commander of the Steveston Lifeboat.

The volunteers of both organizations are deserving of recognition — highly trained to professional marine standards and willing to risk their lives to save others. Looking to the United Kingdom and Ireland, and the RNLI's role there readily dispels any notion that a volunteer organization cannot be highly effective.

Outside areas of federal responsibility, local police and fire departments are also often involved with marine rescue.

If you are concerned about marine safety and want to help save lives at sea there is something you can do: lobby the government for more funding for the Coast Guard, donate to or volunteer with the Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue, or the Canadian Lifeboat Institution. Although they all have saving lives at sea as an objective, they fulfil that in different ways. Choose whichever one you have an affinity for — the person in the water isn't going to care who they're being rescued by.

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