

The Guardian (Charlottetown)

DATE Monday 02 Oct 2000
SECTION/CATEGORY The Province
PAGE NUMBER A3
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Wind and tides raise the bar at Rescue Challenge 2000

MONTAGUE - The winds howled, the tide was strong, and the boys representing the Island loved every minute.

They'd already scoured the navigation charts of Georgetown Bay to know every point and cove. And now, based on the turn of the tide and a raging north east wind, took their best collective guess.

The countdown was on and when the call came in, they jumped into a Zodiac and zipped down the Montague River decked out in orange survival suits. Their quarry was a stricken boat and someone overboard, and there was no time to delay.

"It's a great day for a rescue," shouted fisherman Art MacDonald as Kevin Llewellyn took the wheel and Jeff MacNeill manned the radio.

The trio had a mission. Not only locate the target victim floundering somewhere in the cold, choppy waters, but do it fast enough that they might even win this division of the Rescue Challenge.

"It took us only 25 minutes," said Llewellyn, a fisherman from Gaspereaux, when the Island contingent arrived back at the Montague wharf. "That's pretty darn good, especially if you were the one in the water waiting for rescue."

It was Saturday afternoon and the Canadian Coast Guard was hosting Rescue Challenge 2000, a friendly competition to test the skills of the Maritime auxiliarists on call for

emergency rescue on the high seas. There are 16 zones in the Maritimes and teams from each were represented. And like rural firemen or EMO ground rescue teams, the dozens of competitors gathered from three provinces here this weekend were volunteers.

"We get a situation to plot out and we have to find the victim," said MacDonald, a Souris fisherman pulling off the hood of his survival suit. "We have to project, based on the tide and the wind, where the target might be. Where it drifted or was blown . . . and time is everything if you're the one out their in the water."

The Island trio ran a search pattern as part of the SAREX competition — search and rescue — which is the main event of the six different categories. The teams also participated in vessel safety checks, first aid, communications, line throwing, and pump operations.

"From the time the phone rang to alert us, we had eight miles to go until we got there to rescue them," said MacNeill, another Souris fisherman.

This year, the event faced fierce winds whipping down the river and the problem of one Zodiac conking out. Last year, when the event was held in Dartmouth, N.S., competitors actually participated in a real rescue when a sail boat foundered in Bedford Basin.

"It's a friendly competition, but they take it dead serious," said Paul Kendrick, supervisor of Search and Rescue Programs in Dartmouth. "They can test their skills against each other and it keeps them sharp so they're up to the standards we ask them to meet."

Kendrick said while the Coast Guard might pick up incidental costs such as meals or fuel, the 750 auxiliarists across Atlantic Canada are all volunteer, mainly fishermen and pleasure boaters.

"They do it to help their own communities and believe me, they are all dedicated."