

February 2, 2000.
Del Mar, Ca.

FLIPPED OFF!

Was it the Kiwi Curse? Or was it the cruel finger of fate that flipped the boat? Surely, it wasn't just a coincidence. The two rescues had too much in common. After almost a year to the day, over the same rock reef, Del Mar Lifeguards were involved with another dramatic rescue involving their Inflatable Rescue Boat.

Last year it was "Balloon Down". Twelve passengers were rescued from the frigid surf when their hot air balloon went down in the ocean off Del Mar. One of the key characters in that rescue had been boat operator Mark Rathsam, fresh off the plane from his IRB training in New Zealand. This year, Mark was in the boat again, but this time it was other crewmembers who had just returned from Kiwi-land IRB training. And once again, the entire episode became a terrific learning experience, a training exercise far beyond the wild imagination of any instructor.

As before, the training lessons reminded us of the importance of staffing, communication, equipment, leadership and backup, backup backup.

Staffing for any small agency means cross trained versatile employees and keeping as many part-timers available as possible. One of the key players in this latest boat rescue was Larry Helland. "LH", also know as the "the nail" as in "tough as", is a veteran guard with years of big water experience. Although a "part timer", LH has been with Del Mar seemingly since the last ice age or before the freeway, which ever came last. Versatile is Larry's middle name. He's a true renaissance lifeguard. LH is a licensed electrician, a handy plumber-carpenter-painter, a fine piano player, dancer and national-class masters swimmer. Larry just happened to come by the HQ to see "what up". Well, the surf was up.

Monday, January 31 was the biggest day in Del Mar since El Nino stomped us. The huge westerly was pushing ten feet at dawn and just kept growing. As the tide dropped the dark humps were stacked to the horizon. Our line-of-sight indicators gave us guesstimates of twelve-foot faces but with nobody out, it was hard to be sure. By noon, the cloud breaks were going off. Big billowing peaks were feathering in spots that broke only every five years or so. One of these breaks was off the Del Mar Rivermouth, way outside over a deep rock reef. The wave was shifty and especially unpredictable since we seldom saw it break. So of course, it was here that Mark and Larry decided to take the IRB.

No, they weren't joy riding. Some brave souls had made it out at 8th Street, about a half-mile from the HQ, so Lifeguard Chief Pat Vergne had OK'd the IRB patrol. Mark and LH popped out through the gnarly shore-break with no problem. They had powered south easily staying away from the clean-up sets. The two surfers at 8th Street had been mercifully washed in so the boat was cleared to go north. Even from the elevation of the HQ, there were moments when we couldn't see the IRB between the swells. Squawking excitedly on the boat's radio, LH was telling us about the huge 8' *BACKS* of the waves! We guessed he was just showing off his "Hawaiian Scale" wave knowledge. By the time the boat got to the Rivermouth, about a mile north, we had to use our "big eye" monster binos to keep them in sight. Then the real fun began.

Way, way outside off Rivermouth, two surfers had somehow made it out into what they thought was the lineup. In these conditions, anybody in the water is a potential rescue regardless of skill level. So, Mark and Larry thought this would be a great opportunity to make sure these surfers were ok. Powering through some monster sets, the IRB made it to the outside area past where the biggest waves had been breaking. The two surfers were tentative but alert. They assured our crew that they were well outside the surf zone. Famous last words...

From HQ we could see a mega-set beginning to show well north and outside of where the IRB was idling. Mark and LH also saw the set and began to rev the engine getting ready to head for the deeper water. The engine sputtered and coughed. With the big blue mountain of water bearing down on them, Mark decided to head at an angle for the shoulder instead of risking a reverse pitch under the vertical lip. They made it half way up the shoulder. Then, as the wave's wind started to push under their bow, the boat hurtled over the top of the lip. Airborne, spiraling, doing a fine imitation of a Dolphin's kick-out, the boat spun over the back of the wave and landed keel up. Now things would get dicey.

Mark and Larry surfaced quickly and got the boat righted. Mark even managed a few frantic pulls on the starter cord but to no avail. It was then that the rest of us knew that we'd be in on the action. With that unmistakable nervous giggle, part excitement, part concern, Mark gave his assessment. "I think we're in trouble!" His understatement of the year was a blithe reference to that inevitable next wave, always bigger than the one you just made it over. We could see this masher starting to tumble a hundred yards outside of the boat. By now, our guys needed no prompts. They had put on their fins, firmly strapped on the radio and were relaxing away from the boat, waiting for the inevitable thrashing.

Meanwhile, back at HQ, the backup plans were already in gear. Loud and clear "10-2" communication was vital. The communication lessons from this incident involved equipment and staffing. One pleasant surprise with our equipment was how well the portable radio worked in the water, even after the severe dunking. The plastic bag type radio case proved to be a winner.

Effective staffing revolves around an alert dispatcher and on this day, it was a crusty veteran of 27 years service, Jim Lischer, “on the comm.”. Jim had the boat locked in on the big eyes and it was his excited exclamation, “they flipped”, that got the rest of us moving. Also a boat operator, Jim alerted Enrique Montoya to prep the second IRB for a possible rescue mission. Enrique, like Rathsom last year, had just gotten off the plane from New Zealand and was rarin’ for action.

Having a second boat is essential. Just as lifeguards work best in pairs, so it seems do IRBs. A situation as heavy as this one, way outside in huge surf, demands another IRB, a helicopter or maybe a hot-air balloon? Stored in the boat shed at 20th Street Lifeguard sub-station, the second IRB could be in the water in less than ten minutes. In that same time frame, any other backup efforts, even by the strongest paddlers or swimmers, would still be getting pounded in the surf line. As it turned out, the second boat wasn’t needed. But, it was a great lesson to know how quickly we could respond when called for.

Further backup was responding from all over Del Mar. Lifeguard Chief Vergne, this time *with* a wetsuit, was ready to either man the second boat or take the comm. at HQ. Former lifeguard and iron-armed paddler Mike Emerson was responding from his coat-and-tie job at City Hall. Other guards staffing the nearby Community Center were sprinting to the HQ, hoping to get into the action. The loud and clear communication that the boat crew needed help had set into motion the response from all available hands.

The obvious examples of leadership came from the usual suspects including Pat and Jim. Having been in similar situations with the IRB, Mark was now a young “seasoned vet”. His crewman LH has always been the type to speak softly but get the job done, especially when things get tough. Fresh from their Kiwi training, Enrique, Andy Buser, Kurt Lager and Tyler Grant were almost disappointed that their new skills were not needed in the backup boat. They were clearly the newly emerging leaders.

Other lessons? Oh yea, Mark and Larry can swim in through the gnarliest shore break even when it’s sucking up, top-to-bottom-pitching. They both made a few trips down with the rinse cycle, bouncing off the reef and getting rag-doll rolled. Mark managed to not only hang on to the boat radio but even broadcast some garbled updates about their progress.

Also noted; those IRBs are self-rescuers! Bobbing and weaving like some punch-drunk boxer, that boat wallowed all the way in to the beach by itself. And, following some WD40 resuscitation, the motor even started!

Eric W. Sandy
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