

Overview of the Oceanside Lifeguard Service

By Tim Fellars

Located north of Carlsbad and south of Camp Pendleton, the City of Oceanside has 3.7 miles of coastline, visited by over 3,800,000 people in 1998. A few of the attractions unique to Oceanside are the city's Municipal Pier, one of the longest on the West Coast at 1900 feet, and the Oceanside Harbor -- the only small craft harbor between San Diego and Dana Point.

The City of Oceanside (population 150,000) has become an extremely popular location for special events such as numerous professional and amateur surfing contests, the NSSA Nationals and the World Body Surfing Championships among others. The U.S. Triathlon Series held two triathlons in Oceanside last year, including the National Championships in October (see attached article.) The city has hosted the ESPN X-Games, and this year will be home (along with Camp Pendleton) to the first ever California Ironman.

And for all of these visitors and events, the Oceanside Lifeguard Service is responsible for their safety – on the beach and in the water.

Last year the lifeguards chalked up 1,675 rescues and 148,500 preventative actions at the beach. And with large south swells breaking frequently across the entire entrance to the Oceanside Harbor, they were called upon 41 times for boat rescues.

The attitude of the Service is best articulated by a supervisor's comment, "We try to instill in our staff a philosophy of three "P's" – be Preventative, be Proactive, and be Positive. With those guidelines, combined with a solid background in lifeguard skills, we feel our staff provides a great service to the people who visit Oceanside's beaches."

A division of the Dept. of Harbor and Beaches, the Service has grown from its beginnings in the 1940's into a seasonal staff of 40, with four people working year-round. The Lifeguard Division is headed by Ray Duncan, the Lifeguard Manager, and Matt Stephens, the Lifeguard Captain. Two Lieutenants, Jose McNally and Bill Curtis, complete the group of full-time officers. Five Sergeants (seasonal) have specific responsibilities in operations, special events, and junior lifeguards.

With a goal of increasing their public education effort, the Junior Lifeguard program expanded this year to include the many children in northern San Diego County who attend school year-round (with one month vacation blocks scheduled throughout the year.) 450 Junior Guards were taught during 7 four-week sessions, beginning in April and continuing through October, increasing the number of participants by over 50% from 1998.

The Service has several teams that are called upon for emergencies requiring special training. A Dive Team comprised of 9 Scuba-certified lifeguards, with assistance from the officers of the Harbor Patrol, is responsible for diver rescue, search & recovery, and

salvage in Oceanside's coastal waters and lagoons. 12 staff members, trained as Swift Water Rescue Technicians, are called out for rescues occurring in the San Luis Rey River, Loma Alta Creek, and several other flood zones throughout the city.

Oceanside was recently honored by the San Diego County E.M.S. as the first lifeguard agency in the county to be trained in a new A.E.D. pilot program. 1/3 of the staff was trained in the use of Automated External Defibrillators (A.E.D.) and two lifeguard units now patrol Oceanside's beaches with a defibrillator.

The Lifeguard Division has four mobile units, one wave runner, and one IRB at their disposal. Two-thirds of the seasonal guards have EMT certification (or higher) which is required to operate all units and dispatch.

The Lifeguard Division of the City of Oceanside has seen significant growth throughout the 1990's. With major development plans in progress for both the pier and harbor areas, the Lifeguard Division will be growing even more in years to come.

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