

Nervous Time for Neuroscientists

by Paul Clayton, Encinitas

It was 1:23 a.m. on the morning of November 16th when I was awakened by the sound of my pager. Lights had been spotted in the water near H Street off Encinitas. As I responded, I remember thinking that it was perhaps lobster poachers in the Marine Reserve. You can imagine my surprise when Encinitas Lifeguard Captain Larry Giles, who was first on scene, radioed that he had a 36-foot sailing vessel grounded on the reef with four passengers on board. The waves were 4-6 feet; visibility was near zero in the thick coastal fog. A request was put out for mutual aid, with Solana Beach and Del Mar Lifeguards answering the call. Del Mar Lifeguard Chief Pat Vergne and I boarded the vessel Care Free and kept the crew above decks and calm. We were able to safely lower the three men and one woman off the boat that was listing dangerously. Lifeguards Mark Rathsam, Jon Edelbrock, Turtle Rudolph, Captain Paul Dean from Solana and Captain Giles were waiting below in the surf. The vessel rocked precariously as waves broad-sided the hull. The small anchor on board had been deployed but was not enough to stop Care Free's drift across the reef toward the bluffs due to the surf and rising tide. Once on the sand, Encinitas Fire Department Paramedics evaluated the victims for injuries and began warming them with hot-packs to prevent hypothermia. Due to the rising tide it was necessary to move off the beach quickly or our trucks would be trapped. At this point all passengers were safely on the beach and we could do no more for the vessel except shut the hatch.

Once back at lifeguard headquarters we began formulating a plan to secure and possibly save the vessel. Our initial plan was to secure the Care Free with another anchor and await the rising tide. Our wave-runner would bring in a towline and once there was enough draft, Vessel Assist would tow the Care Free out to sea. I went back down into the surf with Captain Robert Butler from Vessel Assist to set the anchor. It was precarious work as the surf pounded the vessel. The mast swayed back and forth above me as I attached our anchor to the bow cleat. Unfortunately, while setting the anchor, Captain Butler saw extensive hull damage sustained during the grounding. The possibility was great the Care Free would sink quickly if we towed it into deeper water. If it sank it would leak all 25 gallons of diesel fuel on board into the Marine Refuge. We couldn't take that chance. Our anchor held and kept the vessel intact by preventing it from hitting the bluffs. At low tide the insurance adjuster drove down to the vessel and ruled it a total loss. We were brought in two tractors and they carried the Care Free off the beach and onto a flatbed truck. The Care Free was de-masted and driven away at 5:00 pm.

I spoke later with the Captain of the Care Free and learned that it was a rented vessel. All four passengers on board were Neuroscientists, on their way back to Newport Beach from a Convention in San Diego when they ran aground at Boneyards.

Editor's Note: Even though their boat was lost, none of the passengers were hurt, thanks to the excellent cooperation of the various agencies involved.