



Rough Water Training

by Scott Gaffney, La Jolla.

"Now that was rough water!" Mark Rathsam, Del Mar Lifeguard Deputy Chief, was admiring the turbulence he'd just swam through in front of "The Big Dam". Along with chief Pat Vergne, Mark and six other Del Mar guards were in town for three days of "rough water" training on the Colorado River near Blythe California.

Their objective was to become certified rough water rescuers. Exercises included mock rescues, throw-bag drills, rope rigging and other work with the Inflatable Rescue Boat (IRB). And there was also the classroom work including lectures, books, manuals and exams — just like school! Not to mention the evening debriefings at the local pub. But it was the swimming drills that caught their breath. This wasn't like ocean white-water. Not even a big day of beach-break pounding could compare. Gordon Cromwell, a veteran of Fiji's reef waves noticed immediately, "the power of the river was humbling" he said. Jon Edelbrock described the "escape route" if a swimmer was caught too close to the dam's face where a vertical spiraling eddy would suck you under. "You had to have the concentration to dive under to where the current pushes down-river". If you missed this current you could get caught in a churning death cycle. The river doesn't back off. It's relentless.

Even though the conditions were different from the ocean environment, the training was immensely valuable. The Del Mar crew learned teamwork and expanded their aquatic knowledge. In future white-water emergencies they will know how to react and be confident of how their teammates will react. They will anticipate each other's moves just like a football team. When white water hits, whether it's the unyielding turmoil of a standing wave in the river or the exploding impact zone at the beach, the lifeguard must be ready. They must have the right equipment and know how to use it properly including everything from ropes to boats. This crew will do that. "It was fun. It was hard work and we all learned a lot," said Chief Vergne. "It's just too bad there's not one decent restaurant in that whole damn town".



McCluskey, Nick Romem, Pat Vergne, Gordon Cromwell, Mark Rathsam. Photo by Mark Rathsam.