



## Ocean City Today – On Guard Safety Tips

by Kristin Joson



*The writer has been working with the Beach Patrol for nine years. In the off-season, she is an Instructional Specialist in Charles County. The OCBP consist of over 200 men and women dedicated to ocean rescue and maintaining a safe and orderly environment on Ocean City's beach. The Surf Rescue Technicians guard the beach seven days a week from 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.*

### **Beach Patrol Off Duty until Next May**

Published September 21, 2012

As you take a walk along the beach next week you won't see the familiar white lifeguard stands. The beach patrol will officially end the 2012 guarding season this Sunday, Sept 23rd. During our guarding season, Surf Rescue Technicians (SRTs) are in stands and fulfill all 3 parts of our mission (Education, Prevention, and Intervention) on a daily basis between 10:00 am and 5:30 pm. After this Sunfest weekend, the lifeguard stands will be removed quickly from the beach and we will no longer position SRTs along Ocean City's beaches until May 2013. At this time of year it is important for people to realize that the beach patrol is off duty and they should not participate in water related activities until the beach patrol is back on duty next Memorial Day weekend. We realize that in spite of our warnings a warm sunny day, even in October, will tempt some people to make the very poor decision to venture into the ocean. Please heed our warnings. The same rip current hazards that exist during our season, when we are making hundreds of rescues, are still present now and could possibly even be more treacherous due to tropical storm activity that is typical for this time each year. The ocean is no less dangerous than it was in late August and September. Several tropical storms formed out in the Atlantic and resulted in the OCBP having a very busy couple of weeks pulling people out of rip currents. Although we experienced no fatalities while we were on duty, we made over 200 rescues since Labor Day. We also deployed several evening mobile patrols due to the high rip current risk and made numerous rescues, during these patrols, of people who should never have been swimming without lifeguards. When people that do not heed the warning of no swimming while guards are off duty, decide to venture in the ocean, they could very well find themselves in danger, (just like it was August or last weekend when we were making hundreds of rescues). The difference now will be that there are no SRTs on the stands keeping a watchful eye and no one nearby to respond if the need arises.

During this time of the year stands are pulled off the beach and lifeguards no longer report for duty. However we will maintain a minimum presence for a few weeks (through Columbus Day Monday) with a mobile Water Rescue Patrol. The Water Rescue Patrol is comprised of mobile rescue units. These mobile rescue units are first-aid and AED equipped and consist of one SRT (rider) acting as the primary rescue swimmer while the other SRT (driver) maintains radio communication and backup during an emergency. Both are qualified as surf rescue technicians, medical first responders and are quad (ATV) certified.

Although Ocean City Fire/EMS are ready and willing to respond to surf rescues (The OCBP has trained a group of Fire/EMS personnel as rescue swimmers), the beach patrol is the agency that is trained and equipped specifically for this mission. Having fully equipped mobile rescue response vehicles with a driver and a rescue swimmer already on

the beach will save critical minutes should the need arise. The OCBP will be in response mode like the paramedics or police, with a small number of mobile rescue units deployed on the beach. Each unit will patrol two to three miles of ocean. Typically, the nearest mobile rescue unit will respond to the "swimmer in trouble" call, forwarded by a 911 dispatcher. Having the mobile units out on the beach makes the OCBP one step closer if someone needs assistance. When a rescue is needed, the rescue swimmer initiates the intervention while the driver who is also a trained rescue swimmer maintains radio contact with the Ocean City Communications Center and acts as backup to the initial rescuer and requests additional resources should the situation require any (EMS, Police, Coast Guard, etc.).

Without the Water Rescue Patrol, a call to 911 would be answered in Snowhill and then be transferred to Ocean City Communications who would then dispatch the nearest available EMS unit and fire department personnel. Although Ocean City emergency response time is the fastest in the Nation, during a drowning situation, where minutes count, this process may take tragically too long. The beach patrol's response to this circumstance is to have Mobile Rescue Units already staffed on the beach. Having these units already on the beach and mobile effectively reduces the response time from original call to victim contact and will hopefully result in a successful intervention. It is important however that people not depend on these mobile rescue units as if they are lifeguards protecting their love ones. Without educating the public and actively preventing potential incidents the beach patrol is unable to fulfill its mission and work in a proactive posture, therefore we are in a reactionary mode and cannot provide the coverage that the public is accustomed to during our regular guarding season. We have seen too many times when swimming without lifeguards and poor judgment turns into a tragedy with the loss of a life. Our saying, "Keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard's in the stand!" is a friendly reminder of the very serious warning, to only swim when lifeguards are on duty.

The first priority of the Ocean City Beach Patrol continues to be public safety. Therefore, we strongly encourage all beach patrons to restrict any beach or water related activities to times when beach patrol personnel are on duty, never swim alone, always stay within the limits of their ability and never rely on a flotation device. Since the beach patrol is off duty until May and we have explained the dangers of swimming unprotected, we do not expect to see you or anyone you care about in the ocean until Memorial Day weekend 2013 when the Beach Patrol will return to duty protecting you and your family. If you do see a swimmer in distress do not attempt to go in after them, or you may become an additional victim. Instead, immediately call 911, know the location of the incident, follow the victim along the beach and remain on the scene until rescue personnel arrive and identify yourself to them. If the person goes under the water before rescuers arrive, it is important to mark the last seen position of the victim with a landmark on the beach to aid the rescues with the search. If the person does manage to rescue himself or herself, please let the responding personnel know that they are safely on shore. We have seen too many cases where someone has tried to rescue a distressed swimmer and has drowned in the attempt. Especially tragic are the number of parents that have died in Ocean City while attempting to rescue their children who they have allowed to swim without lifeguards on duty.

We at the Beach Patrol want to thank Ocean City Today for allowing us to have a weekly safety feature. The beach patrol's mission has three focuses: education, prevention, and intervention. Without a doubt the most obvious and the one that attracts the most attention is intervention when one of our guards blows a whistle, jumps off the stand, runs down the beach, and then swims out to rescue a swimmer in distress. Although this happens several thousand times each season it is not our major focus but rather it is prevention of accidents and injuries through our educational outreach efforts and programs that we make our number one priority. That is why each week we use this space to try and educate all of the readers of Ocean City Today. I truly believe that through the exposure in this newspaper that many lives have been saved and will continue to be saved because someone has read the article or passed on the information that they learned to others. So if you have enjoyed this column and have learned any new information about beach or water safety, not only pass it on to others but take the time to thank the editors of Ocean City Today. Have a safe fall and winter and we will see you Memorial Day Saturday 2013 when the Beach Patrol will return to duty protecting you and your family. Each year people die in Ocean City because they chose to swim without lifeguards... Don't let it be you or someone you love. However you remember it, swimming only when lifeguards are on duty could save a life... yours or someone you love!