



OCBP Helicopter Rescue Swimmers

This summer the Ocean City Beach Patrol (OCBP) and the Maryland State Police (MSP) formed a partnership to help our organizations work more closely on water-related emergencies. This collaboration started when a decision was made to move the State Police helicopter (Trooper 4) from the Salisbury/ Wicomico/Ocean City Airport to the Ocean City Airport during weekends and Mondays from Memorial Day until Labor Day. Statistics revealed that the majority of the medevac calls received in the summer season were generated from the beach on weekends; therefore, the decision was made to deploy the helicopter from the Ocean City Airport so that it would be closer to the beach; thus cutting down on the critical response time. It started with the orientation of senior Beach Patrol officers for the purpose of being used in the observer capacity, providing a better vantage point when surveying a potential situation, providing air support during times of high rip current risk, and/or searching for missing swimmers from the helicopter.



Since the most dangerous time for swimmers at the beach is in the evening, after the lifeguards go off duty, the MSP and the Beach Patrol discussed the plan of using the guards during extended evening patrols to look for rip currents from above so that they could then radio the dangerous rip information to emergency responders on the ground. Acknowledging that getting help to the victim and keeping them calm and above water is the most important aspect of a successful rescue rather than how quickly we get them out of the water, and realizing that ground response would take critical time, the talks progressed to the idea of actually deploying a swimmer from the helicopter; the partnership then evolved to the next level.

The MSP were initially hesitant about using people outside of their agency, but they quickly supported the idea once they realized how competent the OCBP guards were in being the best-trained ocean swimmers, as well as being extremely professional and skilled during training and rescues. The partnership evolved into an efficient, expertly trained and equipped emergency rescue team with top-notch pilots, medics and now rescue swimmers. In total, 12 beach patrol veteran lifeguards were trained along with State Police pilots and paramedics. This preliminary training took place in the Beach Patrol classroom, the Coast Guard Station and the Harrison Hall pool. After many hours in the classroom and on the ground, the training culminated in practicing actual air deployments into the ocean off Assateague Island.

The guards went up in the helicopter two at a time, along with a pilot, copilot, the

trainer and a helicopter paramedic. The chopper flew over the inlet and hovered above the water just south of the rock jetty. The rescue swimmers were taught how to work the harness, how to be lowered into the water, what type of hand signals to use when communicating with the paramedics waiting above in the chopper, and how to put an injured victim into a basket to be lifted up for immediate treatment. One by one, the Beach Patrol rescue swimmers were then lowered from the helicopter and inserted into the ocean near a simulated victim. Once in the water, they practiced the procedure of quickly disconnecting from the cable, signaling to the hoist operator that they were okay, and then swimming to a simulated victim.

The new partnership was quickly put into use this summer, in several different situations. The very day after the orientation training, a call was made to 911 that two people had gone into the water at 139th Street and never came out. The lifeguards were not yet on duty for the season, but Beach Patrol personnel working on the lifeguard stands in the area responded along with the Ocean City Fire Department. Sgt. Ryan Cowder, who had attended the previous day's orientation, reported to the Coast Guard station where he was picked up by Trooper 4 to aid in the search from above. The people were found safe and walking on the beach several blocks away.

The MSP helicopter also proved to be an invaluable tool during a massive fish kill which closed several Delaware beaches earlier in the season. Being able to survey the location where tens of thousands of dead fish floated in the ocean allowed Ocean City's Public Works department to initiate a clean-up operation prior to the fish washing up on shore. As a result, the Ocean City public never had to deal with any dead fish or the associated smell.

Although no actual life-threatening rescues were performed with Trooper 4 and the OCBP this summer, the partnership still proved to be an invaluable asset to the Town's emergency response. The medevac deployment from the Ocean City Airport was beneficial in providing quick response time for several serious neck back and trauma injuries. The resulting partnership between one of the most highly trained, professional beach patrols and an advanced aerial rescue unit is expected to shorten response times and to help save lives. Not only does this relationship benefit the many residents and visitors to the Ocean City area, but it now gives the Maryland State Police Aviation Division a group of highly trained rescue swimmers that may be deployed anywhere throughout the state.

Considering some of the high water and flooding situations that occurred this hurricane season, having this resource could prove invaluable.

On Sunday, September 18, the Maryland State Police Aviation Command came to Ocean City to provide advanced training for removing victims of serious injuries including suspected head and spinal injuries in deep water scenarios. The USCG, OCFD and DNR were invited and participated in discussions of SOP's and protocols.

As the newest asset to the Maryland State Police Aviation Command the Beach Patrol was invited to a meeting of the state's HEAT (High Elevation and Areal

Tactics) teams at the MSP Aviation Command Headquarters at Martin's airport in Baltimore. Captain Arbin and Kristin Joson, serving as the Public Information Officer, attended this very informative meeting, where discussions of future plans and training for the state's HEAT teams, including grants for additional training. Major Mark Gibbons, the commander of the Aviation Division began the meeting with an overview of recent activity with the training of the HEAT teams throughout the state and then gave the history and development of the Beach Patrol rescue swimmer program. It was humbling to hear others talk about the skill and professionalism of our personnel. He also emphasized the desire of the MSP to continue exploring better ways to deploy its fleet of medevac helicopters around the state in an effort to get the resources to areas where they are most needed and cut down on critical response time. Following the conclusion of the formal meeting the group received a guided tour of the Martin's State Airport MSP facility, where all maintenance and operations are performed.

The Beach Patrol's rescue swimmers add a critical resource that can aid in getting highly trained personnel to distressed or drowning swimmers more quickly not only in Ocean City but wherever there is a need in Maryland. During August's hurricane threat and associated flooding throughout Maryland, Captain Arbin was in contact with Major Mark Gibbons (Aviation commander) and James Dinges (Chief Pilot and Safety Officer) and provided them with a list of our trained Rescue Swimmers and where in the state they were located (most people were evacuated from Ocean City at the time, while MSP aviation set up command in Ocean City). Captain Arbin was able to offer our trained Beach Patrol staff as a resource to Maryland State Police. Although originally the training was to insert a rescue swimmer into the ocean for a swimming rescue, these individuals could prove to be of assistance during other hoist rescue scenarios, that the State Police may respond to throughout the year.

The training sessions have brought new skills and OCBP will continue to train with other agencies such as the United States Coast Guard and the Department of Natural Resources and the MSP. The Ocean City Beach Patrol feels privileged to be working with the State's primary law enforcement agency. This collaboration is an amazing opportunity for both the Ocean City Beach Patrol and the Town of Ocean City in our efforts toward creating an ever safer resort.

The post-season debriefing between Ocean City officials and Maryland State Police took place at the end of October. The actual statistics revealed that Trooper 4 was deployed at the Ocean City airport 36 times, and flew 13 medevac missions during those deployments with 8 of the medevacs (61.5%) for beach related neck/back.