



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 Motorized Rescue Units Aid in Beach Safety

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It might surprise you to know that for the most part, the basic equipment used by the Ocean City Beach Patrol today is very similar to what was used 80 years ago both in form and in function. In 1949 the galvanized steel rescue buoys that were designed by the late Captain Robert S. Craig. The torpedo shaped devices were used until the modern, orange plastic buoys that you see guards using today, started to take their place in 1982. Over the years, the uniform shorts have changed with the styles of the day, and whistles have gone from metal to plastic. However, the biggest change in equipment is in the vehicles used to bring rescuers to an emergency scene and to transport injured patients and rescued victims to safety, particularly the ATV fleet (all terrain vehicle) and PWCs (personal watercraft).

In 1978, the beach patrol received two of the first generation ATV trikes (three wheelers) from the police department. Since the town had grown and the number of guards had tripled in less than three years, the three-wheeled ATVs became an effective method of transportation for supervisors on the beach. By 1985, the patrol used five ATVs, or "quads" as the main form of transportation for the sergeants who supervised each area of the beach. As the needs of the patrol and its operations have changed over time, the number of available ATVs has increased. This has reduced the area of coverage for each area supervisor and decreases the response time to an emergency. It also places an AED (Automated External Defibrillator) closer to a potential patient.

In addition to transporting supervisors, ATVs are used to support many of the activities that make up today's beach patrol. We use them to move personnel, support training and certification activities, replace or reposition guard stands, and support many of the on-the-beach special events (air show, boat race, fireworks, etc). But, the most important role played by the ATVs remains unchanged. They are the best method of bringing rescue personnel to an emergency scene, and for transporting injured beach patrons off the beach. Each beach patrol



*In a joint exercise between the USCG and the OCBP, rookie lifeguards learn to make rescues in the OC inlet while veteran SRTs act as the victims. The Beach Patrol PWC provided additional safety and support.
Photo by Kristin Joson, OCBP*

ATV is equipped with a radio that links the operator to Ocean City Communications, rescue buoy, first aid equipment and an AED.

Beach patrol supervisors on quads respond to hundreds of emergency calls each year. They have deployed their AEDs many times, twice within one minute of receiving a call for help, and had several successful resuscitation efforts just this summer with multiple successful deployments in the past several years.

ATV operators are assigned diverse and important tasks; therefore each of them must be a veteran member of the Ocean City Beach Patrol. They must complete a specialized training course that includes emergency vehicle operations, emergency response, protocol/procedures for transporting patients during emergencies, beach driving safety, vehicle care and maintenance. During training, they practice maneuvering the ATV through an obstacle course and over a dune crossing with a back-boarded "patient." Each trainee must take a turn as the driver, the patient on the backboard, and the medic following behind tending to the "patient." This gives the operators first-hand experience with what it feels like to be the patient and the medic, and teaches them to drive accordingly. Each ATV operator must be re-certified annually.

In 2005, beach patrol guarding was extended to accommodate the growing late-season beach population. Most employees have returned to their winter activities by this time, making it impossible to effectively staff the beach with lifeguards in towers. Instead, the beach patrol transforms into a fully mobile patrol with quads carrying both drivers and rescue swimmers spaced out along the beach. These mobile rescue units are able to respond to emergencies when dispatched by Ocean City Communications in much the same way as a paramedic or fire engine would. ATVs that were once mostly used for supervision and secondary response have evolved into an integral part of all beach patrol operations.

While use of ATVs has gradually increased over the years, 2008 saw a tremendous jump in use of another type of emergency response equipment, the personal watercraft. The beach patrol has used many types of vessels over the years, from oar-powered dories, to inflatable rubber boats with outboards, to today's personal watercraft. When PWCs first came onto the scene in the 1980s, they were fairly small and lightweight compared to the modern jet skis used by the patrol. As they increased in horsepower, size and weight, they became more difficult to transport and maneuver on land. While early models could be trailered onto the beach and launched by two or three guards, modern skis weigh 800 pounds and were more easily launched from the boat ramp in West Ocean City. The added time and resources required for launching the rescue watercraft made them more difficult to deploy on a regular basis.

In 2008 the U.S. Coast Guard helped OCBP solve deployment problems by allowing us to install a floating boat dock for two rescue watercraft at Station Ocean City. Since the station is only two blocks from beach patrol headquarters, we now have quick access to the PWCs. The floating dock system allows a single operator to launch a PWC in under a minute. All of our PWCs have rescue sleds attached to the stern, allowing distressed swimmers to climb onboard quickly, safely and with little effort. The new dock has allowed us to deploy additional rescue craft patrols in a more efficient manner.

During a nine-day period in July 2008 the beach patrol made an unprecedented 2,070 rescues. It was during this time that rescue watercraft proved their true value. As guards responded to distressed swimmers and backed each other up on the beach, other guards on rescue watercraft were able to help cover those rescues, pull victims from rip currents, and to fill gaps in coverage created by multiple-victim rescues. There is no doubt that having the watercraft deployed during this busy time helped us to prevent tragedies and save lives.

In addition to saving lives, the beach patrol's rescue watercraft plays crucial roles in events such as the Ocean City Air Show and powerboat races. They are used to assist the Fire Marshals office by securing a safety perimeter on the bay surrounding the fireworks launching area at Northside Park. They also are used to provide support and safety for training and qualifying tests in the ocean. In recent years our watercraft have been first on the scene for plane crashes, parasailing incidents and boating accidents. With high maneuverability, quick response time and proximity due to our deployment, we have assisted the USCG with closing cases without their need to respond by confirming that what was called in by a civilian was in fact a dead horseshoe crab and not a swimmer in distress or a piece of floating debris. Additionally, with the high number of inexperienced pleasure boaters who think coming in close to the beach to wave to friends or family on the beach is a fun thing to do, our patrols often serve as safety educators explaining that operating inside the breaking waves or too close to swimmers is not only dangerous, but also illegal and helps prevent serious boating accidents. All of our operators are certified surf rescue technicians and have several years of experience with the beach patrol. They also must complete a nationally recognized safe boater's course, and go through specialized training that involves launching, patrolling, performing water rescues, beaching, vessel care and maintenance. As with our ATV operators, all of the rescue watercraft operators must re-certify every year.

As you can see, although these motorized rescue units are considered recreational vehicles for the general public, these have both become integral components helping us fulfill our mission. These modern additions to the beach patrol's standard operating procedures have complimented the long-standing use of more traditional equipment such as whistle, flags and the lifeguard's buoy. The combination of traditional and updated procedures and equipment have allowed us to continually meet the demands and safety needs of a growing and changing beach population while providing both a safe and enjoyable beach experience for all our residents and visitors.



Captain's note: The United States Coast Guard, Station Ocean City is a great resource and partner of the beach patrol. Not only have they allowed us to deploy two rescue watercraft from their secured waterfront for several years, they allowed us to add a third floating dock for this season and are serving as a landing zone for the Maryland State Police helicopter that we have been training with as rescue swimmers. They also assist us in our training exercises and are our primary backup for rescues in and around the Ocean City Inlet and

any case involving search and recovery.

Another, little known role that the beach patrol has is its request to train others in our area of expertise. Each season we train several selected Ocean City Police officers to operate our ATVs so they may be used to patrol the beach throughout the night. These patrols have prevented numerous types of criminal activity on our beaches and help to maintain a safe atmosphere throughout Ocean City.

When Baltimore City Police needed a training program for its officers that would be operating quad tracks they asked us to develop it and then sent their officers to Ocean City to complete the training. Our use of rescue watercraft has generated interest in our knowledge and skill and as a result has been used in videos about proper use of a PWC, have trained the PWC guides working in and around the Ocean City water sport rental industry and has even led to our training of Army Corp of Engineer PWC operators.