

# Jericho Rescue: A Case for Community Collaboration

**Christopher W. Stairs**

Located along the south banks of English Bay, Vancouver, far from the city's urban core, it can be easy for non-mariners to overlook the Jericho Sailing Centre Association (JSCA) and its longstanding influence across the Lower Mainland's extended boating community. But to do so would also be to overlook an enduring model of inclusiveness and collaboration within western Canada's network of maritime search and rescue (SAR) responders. Protecting the recreational users of English Bay waters for close to 40 years, Jericho Rescue prides itself on contributing an essential safety net for water enthusiasts. Especially now, given recent nation-wide reductions in federally funded Canadian Coast Guard services, Vancouverites can still have peace of mind when boating or participating in other on-water activities.

While in no way would Jericho Rescue claim to have the capacity to replicate or replace the exceptional operations of the Coast Guard, Vancouver Police Department (VPD) Marine Unit, or Royal Canadian Marine Search and

Rescue (RCM-SAR), Jericho's volunteer rescue program provides a meaningful presence and measurable impact throughout the approaches to Vancouver's Burrard Inlet.

How did it all begin? Situated along the shores of what is now Jericho Beach Park, the structure in which JSCA currently resides once served as the Marine and Stores building for the RCAF's Jericho Beach Air Station. A flying boat centre first established in 1920, it became western Canada's largest military base until it was decommissioned and turned over to the City of Vancouver in 1969 for re-designation as parkland. In 1974, keen dinghy sailors with a unique vision formed the Jericho Sailing Centre Association and were granted a license by Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation to occupy 4.5 acres of waterfront land provided they restored the decrepit, condemned Department of National Defence Building 13. This was done, and JSCA has been there ever since. From the beginning, JSCA has provided low-cost facilities for small naturally powered watercraft (sailing dinghies,



Credit: Mike Cotter

*JSCA Rescue patrols local area waters during a multi-event celebration of Canada Day, 1 July 2014.*

windsurfers, kayaks, canoes, outriggers, row boats, stand-up paddle boards).

The not-for-profit, non-taxpayer funded, ocean recreation centre is believed to be the largest organization of its kind in the world. Supported by 700 avid enthusiasts at the time of its inception, JSCA now boasts an annual membership base of over 3,000 households. Almost 500,000 boat launches occur at the recreation centre in a season, undertaken by more than 30,000 people. JSCA schools and affiliated clubs introduce as many as 9,000 people to ocean recreation each year. It is home to the largest windsurfing school in Canada, the largest Sea Scout troop in the world and a sailing program for disabled water enthusiasts that was created and developed by Vancouver's former Mayor, Sam Sullivan. JSCA hosts more than 80 on-water event days each year, with some competitive events including as many as 3,500 participants.

### **Role and Resources**

Unchanged since the founding years, Jericho Rescue's primary function is to protect and serve JSCA members and other users of the Jericho Sailing Centre. Whether winds act up and a novice windsurfer finds himself/herself overwhelmed, or a late-afternoon sailor is caught adrift on an outbound current after thermal winds have died off for the night, Jericho Rescue's objective is to ensure every Jericho member and guest makes it safely back to shore.

Education, of course, is often the key to prevention. Marine education, safety and comprehensive emergency preparedness are critical necessities for any player operating in an active port. Therefore, at the start of each season, Jericho Rescue encourages its members and the general public to attend the English Bay Safety Seminar as a means to promote better ocean recreation practices. Whether commercial, naval, or recreational in nature, big ports see big traffic on the water. Right from the start, ocean safety has served as a cornerstone of JSCA's constitutional mission – and 'Members Helping Members' has always been its driving motto. JSCA stakeholders wanted to ensure that there were resources available to help members and other users in need, and to make certain the centre's activities were not a liability for local professional emergency responders.

Even with preparation and marine safety education, accidents happen and unexpected emergencies arise. Given the rescue team's consistent presence on English Bay waters, it has become regular practice for Jericho Rescue to serve as the 'vessel of opportunity' for distress calls involving members of the public on the water throughout Vancouver's harbour approaches. In 2014, alone, Jericho Rescue recorded a total of 239 mariner rescues in its operational

logs – both of JSCA members and the general public. Many more boating enthusiasts were assisted through simple on-water instruction of self-rescue techniques.

Developed and refined over four decades, the Jericho Rescue program has become a model for grassroots, community-based, marine safety volunteerism. In the earliest years, Jericho Rescue worked with a single rigid-hull inflatable Bombard 18' and relied on the good intentions and safety skills (which were not standardized) of willing volunteers recruited from within the active membership base. Since then, however, Jericho Rescue has evolved into a much more formalized program. Administered by a staff coordinator and governed by a Safety Committee of the Board, Jericho's team of 40 well-trained member-volunteers record an average of 3,000 engine hours each year, ensuring that at least one vessel in Jericho's rescue fleet is on water-ready stand-by during even the coldest winter months when recreational boating is at a low point. These rescue volunteers now undergo a rigorous training and certification program designed with the best practices in boat handling (Pleasure Craft Operator Certificate (PCOC)), VHF radio protocols, first responder medical aid (OFA1), and marine emergency preparedness in mind. Team members are also provided regular orientation on vessel maintenance, on-water needs, recreational ocean craft vulnerabilities, commercial shipping operations, changing sea-state conditions and local-area marine hazards.



*JSCA Rescue recruits receive a fleet orientation during spring training, 26 April 2014.*

Credit: Mike Cotter

Jericho Rescue's fleet has also expanded over the years, and now consists of a Titan 200, Zodiac Hurricane 590, and an aluminum 20' modified Jericho Marks workboat outfitted for rescue, mark setting and light towing. The Jericho Rescue team was fortunate to receive a \$100,000 provincial grant in 2013 to assist in the replacement of the Jericho Marks boat, and to provide much-needed additional funding for the acquisition of the Titan 200. This grant illustrates that provincial authorities recognize the important role Jericho Rescue currently serves in safeguarding its own members, as well as other recreational boaters on English Bay waters, given the federal closure of the Kitsilano Canadian Coast Guard Station in 2013.

### ***Working with Professional Emergency Responders***

With more than 200 marine incidents logged on average each year, Jericho Rescue has come to be recognized for its efforts by both the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) and Vancouver Police Department (VPD) Marine Unit. The Jericho Rescue Team works closely with the Coast Guard, Port Metro Vancouver, VPD Marine Unit, Vancouver Beach Lifeguards, and other agencies that all have an interest in supporting public safety on local waters. In 2011, Jericho Rescue was the recipient of the Royal Life-

saving Society Canada (BC and Yukon Chapter) award in commendation of services rendered.

In no way, of course, does Jericho Rescue match the operations of the CCG, VPD Marine Unit or RCM-SAR. All three organizations acknowledge, however, that Jericho Rescue helps to mitigate a large percentage of minor on-water mishaps throughout English Bay each season. By helping to ensure that small problems remain small, Jericho's Rescue Team enables more sophisticated and costly life-saving resources to focus on truly urgent emergencies as they arise. This happy arrangement was never part of the original design but it has become an important part of the Jericho Rescue legacy.

Bulk transportation and commercial shipping are an integral part of the West Coast economy. Port Metro Vancouver transits \$187 billion in goods each year, and shipping traffic is growing. Commercial anchorage in English Bay increased from 15 to 18 designated moorage locations in the last two years. The density of traffic on the water is significant now and noticeable to all recreational boaters. JSCA hosts many regattas and special events throughout the summer season. Much of this activity occurs amidst the 10 southernmost, densely configured anchorage locations in the bay. It has always been standard procedure for



Credit: Genesis Studios

*An aerial view of Vancouver's English Bay facing north from above the JSCA historic compound and beachfront location, 31 August 2013.*

Jericho management to inform Port Metro Vancouver of any large-scale on-water activities hosted by the organization. As a response to the growing congestion of commercial harbour traffic, Jericho Rescue's recruits have now been instructed to communicate directly with transiting harbour pilots on VHF Channel 12 when circumstances call for a clarification of intentions among multiple vessels.

The rescue personnel continually track when commercial ships are gliding into anchorage positions, and work to ensure recreational boaters are providing adequate room. In many instances, JSCA Rescue's warnings are to boaters who are not part of its member population. As just one recent log entry example from June 2015 illustrates, Jericho Rescue took the initiative to retrieve and relocate a non-JSCA kite-surfer who had ditched in heavy winds, was unable to regain flight, and was floating directly in line with a transiting ship looking to anchor. JSCA Rescue informed the pilot of its intentions to rescue the individual so as to keep the shipping lane clear. All parties were kept regularly informed of developments, the rescue was expeditious and all indications suggested that the commercial harbour pilot genuinely appreciated both the rescue effort and the regular communication updates throughout the episode. There was a respectful spirit of collaboration among all parties. This example of open and proactive communication between commercial shipping and recreational boaters represents a significant advance in multi-stakeholder collaboration over four full decades of shared harbour use.

That Jericho Rescue was invited to join the Marine Emergency Response Coordination Committee (MERCC) in 2014 provides the greatest indication of the role it has come to play in the marine community as a grassroots, but highly visible, volunteer rescue operation. MERCC members now include the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Coast Guard, RCM-SAR, RCMP, VPD, Vancouver Fire and Rescue Services, E-Comm 9-1-1, BC Emergency Health Services, Canada Border Services Agency, CERES Corp, and other related agencies, as well as Port Metro Vancouver. The committee receives additional support from private sector stakeholders such as Harbour Air, Seaspans and the Western Canadian Marine Response Corporation.

MERCC meets every three months to discuss new operational hazards and protocols, revised best practices in the field and to solicit input about improvements to large-scale emergency preparedness and disaster relief policy and programs. Committee members also orchestrate formal and informal, joint on-water training exercises. By participating in some of these training events, Jericho



Credit: Mike Cotter

JSCA Rescue members Andrei Bredin and Ben Middleton train a new recruit while providing safety coverage for a weekly paddling event, 24 May 2014.

Rescue is able to revise its own training regime based on the new skills and practices it sees in use among its professional counterparts at MERCC.

### Conclusions

In the end, Jericho Rescue is still a small operation the primary purpose of which is to protect and serve its own – members helping members, as its motto says. But any player in a marine environment understands how quickly a weather system can change and sea-states worsen, and how rapidly things can go wrong for recreational boaters, novice and veteran alike. Most especially with the down-sizing of CCG operations in the Greater Vancouver region, volunteers for Jericho Rescue understand the important role it has come to play as a vessel of opportunity during times of crisis.

The working partnership that has grown out of open relationships with the CCG, VPD Marine Unit, RCM-SAR, Vancouver Beach Lifeguards, Port Authority and related agencies illustrates a model of collaboration and inclusiveness throughout the working harbour. And while there is a definite need to revisit the deployment strategy of Canadian Coast Guard resources in western Canadian waters, it seems clear that local emergency responders have learned some new lessons in teamwork that are well worth preserving throughout the long haul. Jericho Rescue, for one, is proud to be a part of this newly integrated approach to search, rescue and emergency service delivery. 🍷

Christopher W. Stairs is President of the Board of Directors of Jericho Sailing Centre Association.