

SOUNDINGS

Helping The Heroes Who Help Those In Distress

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Written by Mark Corke



AFRAS provides support to search-and-rescue organizations around the globe.

I've never had to be rescued at sea, though I've come close to calling for help on a few occasions. My granddad sailed on square-riggers long before radios, GPS and other equipment we tend to take for granted. In those days if you went over the side or your ship got into trouble, the chances of being rescued were slim to none.

That may have had something to do with me signing on as part of an inshore lifeboat crew many years ago. Most of our "shouts" were for people who had been washed out to sea on a water toy, surfboard or dinghy. I'll forever remember the looks on the faces of those we saved — often exhausted, frequently scared but forever grateful that we'd come out to rescue them. As part of the U.K.'s Royal National Lifeboat Institution, we did what we did because we believed we had a calling. The RNLI is not run by the British government. It relies entirely on voluntary contributions for funding — most of the lifeboat crews are volunteers, too — so it was a homecoming of sorts when I found out about the Association For Rescue At Sea (afras.org).

AFRAS's mission is "to provide worldwide support and assistance to volunteer maritime rescue services and to recognize and honor extraordinary maritime rescues." I asked AFRAS chairman

Dana Goward how the organization came to be. Many of the rescue services outside the United States are funded voluntarily and, as such, rely on charitable donations, he says. AFRAS provides a "clearinghouse" through which tax-free donations can be made and distributed to organizations the donor designates.

AFRAS also exists to honor civilian and service members who have gone above and beyond in saving lives at sea. Honorees are invited to an awards ceremony that members of Congress, the Coast Guard and AFRAS attend on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., each September.

Goward says AFRAS's overhead costs are small because the only paid administrator is a part-time secretary. Except for a small percentage that's withheld to cover the costs of maintaining a website and a wage for the secretary, the donations are channeled directly to the organizations of the donors' choosing. Goward says there are a lot of British expats in the United States, and this gives them an opportunity to contribute to the RNLI's efforts on a tax-free basis.

Goward was a helicopter pilot before becoming chief of search-and-rescue policy and chief of boat forces for the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard obviously valued his service and experience; it immediately recruited him as a civilian executive when he retired. Goward also sees the need for rescue services to learn from one another and was one of the initiators of an exchange scheme between lifeboat coxswains of the Coast Guard and the RNLI.

Goward is swift to point out that the "sea is boundless" and a "great leveler" that will catch the unwary, the unprepared and the unlucky. He says at least 50 percent of those he had a hand in rescuing over the years were not paying attention and went offshore when they shouldn't have, discovering that "the weather was too much for their boat" or that they were unprepared in some other way. However, he adds that "it's possible to do everything correctly and still get into difficulties that require outside help."



Coast Guard rescue swimmer Christopher Leon is a recent gold medal recipient for his heroic actions in rescuing four men from a rowing boat.

One of the highlights of the AFRAS calendar is the annual awards ceremony in Washington and the presentations to those who have made outstanding contributions to saving people in peril at sea. Coast Guard rescue swimmer Christopher Leon is a recent award recipient. After receiving a distress call from a four-man crew who were attempting to row from California to Hawaii, Petty Officer Leon and his helicopter crew set out to find the stricken boat. The night was inky black and the boat small, but they eventually located it about 60 miles off California. Fifteen- to 20-foot seas hampered the rescue effort.

After dropping into the sea, Leon swam to the boat, which was swamped and partially submerged. After determining the condition of the rowers, he got the man who was in the most critical condition into the rescue basket, which was then winched to the helicopter. Leon was swept 500 yards from the boat, but with tremendous courage, determination and stamina, he swam back to the other rowers.

The helicopter was low on fuel, and Leon decided to send up two rowers in the rescue basket while he remained on board the rowing boat with the remaining survivor. Leon spent almost two hours hunched over the man to protect him from the wind and weather until the

helicopter returned and plucked them to safety.

Presenting a gold medal to Leon at the awards ceremony, AFRAS president Steve Sawyer spoke highly of the rescue swimmer. "His courage, judgment and devotion to duty are most heartily commended and are in keeping with the highest traditions of the maritime community to come to the aid of others in distress," says Sawyer.

AFRAS continues to grow and build on its successes. It is pressing for greater intervention in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas, given the number of refugees crossing to Europe from Syria in overloaded and unsuitable craft. AFRAS is partnering with national and international organizations, most notably the Swedish Sea Rescue Society's Yellow Boat project, which is actively rescuing immigrants at sea.

We're fortunate to have the Coast Guard at the ready in the United States, but supporting the brave volunteers who rescue fellow mariners in distress in other parts of the world is an easy cause to get behind.

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P: (860) 767-3200 | F: (860) 767-1048 | info@soundingspub.com | 10 Bokum Rd., Essex, CT 06426