You might not know his name, but Richard Hiscock is responsible for many advances in boating safety.
moved to Chatham, on the pointy elbow of Cape Cod, and acquired a string of small boats. “I started to learn about boats,” Hiscock says. “My father would have all these talks about his experiences … the development of mirrors, water purification, fishing kits. All that stuff was happening around the house, and it all had a story.”

After high school Hiscock enrolled at American University in Washington, but his academic life was cut short by a draft notice in 1966. Already registered as a conscientious objector, Hiscock was assigned to work in a Boston hospital. The job dealt with creating charts and graphs and included work in a photo lab. Hiscock acquired some photography skills, and in 1969, back in civilian life, he started shooting pictures for local newspapers on Cape Cod.

“I more and more started focusing on marine photography,” he says. “In the early ’70s a friend of mine got the job as head of the Chatham Observer. I started hanging out in the office. It was a great opportunity to do marine photography and to get out on the water.”

One day in 1976 Hiscock was the first to arrive on the scene of a boat fire, “a beautiful, Maine-built lobster boat, burned pretty badly,” he says. “The Coast Guard put the fire out, but there wasn’t too much left of the boat. The guy who owned her, his father was a master cedar planking. He took the boat to his father’s workshop and rebuilt it over the winter. I got the word he was looking for some cedar.”

On his own, Hiscock got the names of some people with cedar to sell and left a message with the lobsterman. “The next spring I saw him and he invited me to work as stern man,” he says. For the next two summers — 1977 and 1978 — Hiscock worked lobstering aboard the 57-footer Benjo, tending up to 75 lobster pots. “I learned a lot. The first year I didn’t even know the radar, the first month or so, no Loran, no life raft or immersion suit,” he says.

It was during Hiscock’s second summer on Benjo that one event focused his attention on the safety needs of commercial fishermen. “We had a bad storm go through in September, a bad north-west gale,” he says. “A lot of boats got caught out in that storm, too, a lot of small boats out of Chatham. The radio was full of people in trouble. The next Monday we were back out fishing again, and the Coast Guard was issuing a pan-pan message. ‘Capt. Cosmo is reported overdue.’ That went on for days.”

Hiscock recalls that the search for Capt. Cosmo lasted nine days, covered 164,000 square miles, and included flights by a U-2 spy plane. “They never found anything,” he says.

Hiscock learned that while Capt. Cosmo had his own survival suits, they had no emergency position indicating radio beacon. (Prisonal models were available at the time.) And he discovered, in this case at least, that Coast Guard searchers had no idea what color survival suit they should be looking for in the ocean.

“I began to explore and do my own homework on more specifically what were the requirements for commercial fishing vessels for safety,” says Hiscock. “I found to my horror that the only regulations that applied were the Motor Boat Act of 1940, which, so it happened, my father had been involved in writing. I thought. This is a little out of date. We ought to be improving the standards for commercial fishing boats.”

Hiscock says one more incident “galvanized” his interest. It came two years later, in 1980, when, as he says, a “sneak northeaster came up under the cloud cover,” undetected by satellites and, therefore, not predicted by the National Weather Service. Boats and lives were lost, and a widow sued.

“My question was, ‘Doesn’t anybody carry a barometer anymore?’” says Hiscock. “If the bottom’s falling out of the glass, you’ve got to know something’s coming.”

By the time of that storm, Hiscock’s knowledge had been expanded. He had attended a conference on hypothermia and had written a paper on his father’s involvement in the development, two decades earlier, of survival suits. A Coast Guard Public Service Commission in 1984 suggests some of Hiscock’s efforts in the following years. “Since 1980, Mr. Hiscock has been actively involved in advancing [the protection of life and property at sea] through legislative and regulatory review and by providing critical input,” the citation reads. “For the past two years, Mr. Hiscock has been a driving force behind the rewrite and republication of the First District Fishermen’s Digest,” which he “skillfully edited and rewrote.” Moreover, in March 1984, the citation says, Hiscock volunteered his local knowledge when a cargo ship grounded on Cape Cod, contributing to the “successful coordination of our efforts.”

While the Navy had employed rescue swimmers since the late 1970s, Hiscock learned that while search and rescue programs exist, they are “woefully underfunded,” he says. “I could see the need for a more comprehensive program.”

Hiscock went on to play a critical role, working with his congressman, Gerry E. Studds (D-Mass.) in writing the Fishing Vessel Safety Act of 1988, which was adopted following the failure of a similar bill in 1986.

“There’s no question that the adoption of the 1988 act and regulations in 1991 that required all [fishing] vessels carry certain equipment saved some lives,” Hiscock says. “When I see those [reports of saved lives] that puts a warm spot in my heart.”

From time to time, Hiscock has been gainfully employed in jobs relating to his mission. He was executive director of the U.S. Lifesaving Manufacturers Association from 1984 to 1986, and an officer in Marine Safety Consultants Inc. in Fairhaven, Mass., investigating marine casualties, from 1987 to 1991. And since 1993 he has served as a director of the Marine Safety Foundation, a nonprofit foundation focusing on “advancing the safety of life and property at sea through research, education and coordination.” His resume is packed with other affiliations and volunteer positions, as well.