

THE CURRENT

SAFETY PIONEER

This man just might save your life

You might not know his name, but Richard Hiscock is responsible for many advances in boating safety

By Douglas A. Campbell

SENIOR WRITER

A Canadian family of four — mother, father and two teenage sons — by 9 p.m. on the last Sunday in August had been stranded on Lake Champlain for 10 hours in their disabled 20-foot powerboat. Strong winds from the south had blown all day up the 25-mile fetch between Vermont and New York, creating 6-foot breaking waves near the shore of Providence Island in South Hero. Anchored there, the small boat bucked violently, though it somehow managed to stay afloat. Efforts by a Coast Guard boat and a local police boat to rescue the family had failed. The 43-year-old father, his 44-year-old wife, and the sons, 17 and 15, were conscious but hypothermic.

The slender lifeline that could lead to the family's survival included Brian Laubenstein, a 45-year-old Coast Guard rescue swimmer aboard a helicopter en route from Cape Cod, Mass., 200 miles to the south. Another critical link in that chain, 61-year-old Richard Hiscock, was drifting toward sleep in his home part-way up the slope between Lake Champlain and the nearest peak in the Green Mountains, unaware of the unfolding drama. That was OK. Hiscock's role, although vital, was remote.

More important for the moment were the efforts of Laubenstein and the three other crewmen aboard the Jayhawk helicopter. They had flown through zero visibility in rain and fog, picking their way over the mountains, and at 9:03 p.m. they hovered above the lake, assessing their options. There were few. So Laubenstein, a 14-year veteran swimmer, clipped onto his cable and headed for the water below. In 14 minutes he had loaded first the mother, then her sons and husband, into the Jayhawk's rescue basket.

Another successful rescue swimmer mission. Another reason for boaters to thank their obscure benefactor, Richard C. Hiscock.

On any given day, on scores of computers around the nation, a blizzard of e-mails concerning maritime safety arrive from Hiscock. These are stories culled from newspapers and magazines as well as announcements and reports by the Coast Guard, other government agencies and professional groups. They are sent to individuals, in various fields, whom Hiscock has encountered over the last 30 years, since he first became obsessed with safety at sea. As a cross-pollinator of

The Coast Guard's rescue swimmer program owes its existence in part to Hiscock.



maritime information, he is a vital link between people whose interests include marine safety in all its forms. The names in his computer address book include many of those working on the front lines of boating safety, from the corridors of Congress to the office suites of admirals, from journalists to life raft repackers.

As a civilian, Hiscock over the decades has written a Coast Guard safety manual for commercial fishermen, helped draft the 1986 federal law governing commercial fishing safety, served as an expert witness on safety issues, and worked as a marine claims investigator. He has written several papers promoting the cause of boating safety and criticizing the Coast Guard for what he sees as the agency's failures. Through these experiences he has, according to those who have worked with him, accumulated in his head an encyclopedic knowledge of the issues and history of marine safety.

"He has so much knowledge now he doesn't know how much he has," says retired Coast Guard Commander L.P. "Bud" Minott. "He sees something, and he's able to project, sometimes decades down the road, what will happen. And he's not afraid to say it."

"He's been one of my best-kept secrets," says Scott Leonard, a construction representative in New England for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "The man is semiretired, and he still provides me with extremely valuable news and updates from his contacts on the Hill and his contacts in the industry."

"He's just such a resource," says Suzanne Bolton, a former congressional aide who now works for the

National Marine Fisheries Service.

"He played probably a totally unrecognized role, except to those of us who know, in the history of the [Coast Guard] rescue swimmer program and how we got it," says Alan M. Steinman, M.D., a retired Coast Guard physician. "I certainly would give him kudos for it."

Not only does Hiscock work in near anonymity, but most of his efforts in the realm of marine safety are voluntary. Fame and wealth clearly aren't his motives. Rather, he seems driven by the same buried force that causes some ocean fish to spawn in the rivers where they were hatched. Certainly, it has a lot to do with fishing.

The Hiscock family moved to Cape Cod in 1951, to a home 500 feet from the ocean. Young Richard was 6 years old. "Age 8, I learned to row," he recalls. "I went down to the fish pier and watched the fish boats come in."

In that Chatham, Mass., home echoed the conversations of his parents about their government service during World War II. Earl and Alice Hiscock had met in Washington, D.C., in the Coast Guard Emergency Rescue Equipment section, where he, a lieutenant commander, was assigned as a technical aide and she was in charge of exhibits. Before the war Earl Hiscock had worked in testing new ideas in life-saving and rescue equipment — such items as signal mirrors, fluorescent dye, kites, night distress signals and reflective buttons for life jackets. In the ERE, he had been involved in pushing the Coast Guard to adopt these items and lightweight survival suits for Navy fliers.

When the war ended and the hunt for communists began under Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the world seemed to forget about the ERE suggestions, and the Hiscocks

See Hiscock, Page 25

Richard Hiscock is relatively unknown to the general boating public, but his influence on marine safety has been enormous.



SABRINA L. ARRAYAN/COAST GUARD; DOUGLAS A. CAMPBELL (FROM TOP)

HISCOCK from Page 7

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 hanging 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 harbor master in Chatham. 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 craftsman. 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

widespread shortages in an economy strangled by the U.S. embargo and the dead hand of bureaucracy.

But wherever you go, the people are wonderful. There isn't a hint of animosity, and their level of spontaneous generosity exceeds anything we have experienced anywhere else in the world. (Cubans are very careful to distinguish between Americans, whom they love, and the policies of the U.S. government, which, in general, they deplore.) It was an uplifting experience for our children, at a relatively young age, to see people with so little yet who were so willing to share what they had.

Cuba clearly has a very difficult transition ahead to the post-Castro era. I hope that this is achieved peacefully, without outside interference, and with the ending of the U.S. embargo. In which case, for the first time in decades, thousands of Americans will be able to experience the full, rich, variegated texture of cruising in Cuba, especially if the new regime eases some of the paperwork requirements.

Search and rescue, Hollywood style

The dangerous world of Coast Guard rescue swimmers was brought to life on the big screen this fall in Touchstone Pictures' "The Guardian," released in September and starring Kevin Costner and Ashton Kutcher.

After losing his crew in a storm, veteran rescue swimmer Ben Randall (Costner) is sent to teach at an elite school for Coast Guard rescue swimmers, where he meets young swim champ Jake Fischer (Kutcher). After graduation the two travel to Kodiak, Alaska, where they perform daring rescues in the Bering Sea.

Producers worked closely with Coast Guard officials to ensure the film was true to life. "What's unique about this story is that it takes you into a world that nobody has ever really seen before ... jumping into 20-foot waves in freezing temperatures and saving lives," director Andrew Davis says on the film's Web site (theguardian.movies.go.com). "So this is a unique opportunity to experience something amazing like that."

Also out this year is "So Others May Live — Coast Guard Rescue Swimmers: Saving Lives, Defying Death" (The Lyons Press, 2006), a book by Martha J. LaGuardia-Kotite. It tells the stories of 12 dramatic rescues made since the program started around 1985.

— Jason Fell

the next two summers — 1977 and 1978 — Hiscock worked lobstering aboard the 37-footer Benjo, tending up to 750 lobster pots. "I learned a lot. The first year, we didn't even have a 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 northwest 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 survival suits on board, they had no emergency position indicating radio beacon. (Primitive 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, it so 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 His-

cock. "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 one-man mission was well under way. 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 Commendation in 1984 suggests some of Hiscock's efforts in the following four 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 completion of this mission."

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 non-profit 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.

However, it is Hiscock's role in the creation of the Coast Guard rescue swimmer program that best illustrates the nature of his contribution to safety at sea. While the Navy had employed rescue swimmers for years, the Coast Guard in 1983 had none. Instead, the agency used amphibious helicopters for rescues at sea. The sinking of a coal-hauling ship, the Marine Electric, off Virginia in '83 exposed the fatal weakness of this approach. In rough seas the helicopters were unable to land, and winds made it impossible for them to lower a rescue basket. Only three of the 34 crewmen, all alive when the ship sank, survived.

"There was huge public focus on Coast Guard marine safety program failures," Dr. Steinman says. "So that stimulated the whole discussion about rescue swimmers." Steinman says he was a proponent, bucking the trend in his agency. But due to protocol, he couldn't take his concerns directly to Congress.

"I had been chit-chatting with Richard about it," says Steinman. He knew a staff member for Gerry Studds. Richard mentioned something to the staffer about what had just happened.

"Gerry just went ballistic [over the Marine Electric tragedy] and wanted to know why the Coast Guard was unable to respond," says Bolton, the former congressional aide. "I talked with Richard, and he basically said they don't have the capability."



Hiscock learned a lot about the safety needs of commercial fishermen working on a 37-foot lobster boat in the late 1970s.

Hiscock became the conduit, helping Steinman inform the congressman, through Bolton, about what was needed. "Richard and I spent a lot of time looking at [the situation,]" Bolton says. "We held congressional hearings and subcommittee hearings, and the outcome was the rescue swimmer program ... in short order. Richard was quite instrumental because he has such a broad knowledge of history and what goes on in the Coast Guard and who to contact. He was my resource."

The day after the August rescue on Lake Champlain, e-mails were dispatched from Hiscock's computer, spreading the story across the country. "I have to say, it makes you feel good," says Hiscock, "in the same way that it makes the rescue swimmers feel good, particularly when it's a situation in which the rescue swimmer made the difference between life and death." ■