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Saving the rescuer from becoming the victim

Initial shock quickly turned to anger, and it made me realise that I had the perfect opportunity to address this issue on an international platform. At the end of the day, if this article just reaches one individual or prevents someone from making the wrong decision, then I consider it mission accomplished.

Water rescue certifications, be it swift water rescue or public safety diving, is a specialty area of public safety. Unfortunately, in some parts of the world, it does not receive the same visibility, respect and visions of training and certification as other areas of public safety. In most places, and in my experience, it seems that whatever rescue truck pulls up on scene with the right-looking equipment and the people that know how to assemble that equipment, responders are allowed access into the rescue scene without the checking of proper certification credentials.

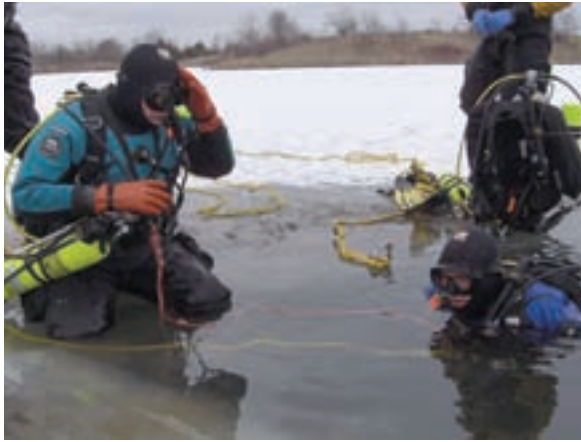
Unlike EMS where continuing education requirements and certification records are tracked and maintained by a local EMS council or state department of health, I have come to find out this is not always the case with water rescue. In this article I will reference "water rescue" to encompass both swift water rescue and public safety diving.

Who looks at log books for their divers and makes sure that each diver when they enter the water is proficient in their diving skills and equipment? Who makes sure that the swift water operator has maintained some degree of proficiency in line systems and self rescue procedures? You would be shocked and amazed at the variety of answers that can be drawn from this question. For every public safety department that uses these specialty disciplines and conducts proper training, upkeep of

The internet is readily accessible for statistical information related to line of duty deaths for water rescue personnel. The information retrieved is shocking, as in the US alone 116 responders died between 1989 and 1997, and 154 people have lost their lives since then, writes Paul Falavolito, Chief of White Oaks EMS in Pennsylvania, USA.

equipment and individual and team training concepts and physical fitness requirements, there are astronomically large numbers of departments that do not. In my years in the field as a public safety diver and or incident commander, I can tell you that there are a large number of responders that show up on scene with nothing more than recreational diving credentials and/or swift water personnel that are getting into water rescue scenarios that are well beyond their individual training credentials. The fact remains that recreational diving certifications do not in any way shape or form cover the hazards that one will encounter in black water diving conditions. Regardless of the extreme danger, many departments will continue to allow their team members to operate under basic entry level certifications. They

Many rescue divers die each year because they have not received proper training.



may have received grant money to purchase the proper equipment and although they may look the part and act the part, the simple fact is that divers die each year at alarming rates due to not having the proper training required for entering the hazardous world of public safety diving. Not to mention the statistics that cover the water rescue personnel that die each year due to sudden cardiac arrest. I could get very in depth into both of these areas but will save those discussion points for a later time.

There is an understanding that each department establishes minimums to allow firefighters, EMS workers and police officers to perform their duties, but this is where the problems begin to arise for these responders. The minimum training standards vary around the world from department to department. There are some that will settle for the basic credentials required to get their departments operational while there are others that would never consider being operational until proper credentials have been



Dive gear that has been used since the 70s and 80s doesn't provide the proper safety and life sustaining ability that modern equipment manufacturers have worked to perfect for decades, as pictured here.

achieved. I would hope that anyone risking their life in any public safety scenario would affiliate themselves with the services that attempt to mitigate liability and only hold themselves to the highest standards of training, certification and equipment available. I know that this is not always the case. Common sense must prevail when at the scene of any rescue. For public safety personnel the true art of being a professional comes when you realise that you do not have the proper training and or qualifications to enact the rescue and at that time utilise the mutual aid pacts that should be in place for your service areas. For services that offer many areas of rescue to their communities, if water rescue is not your primary service that you provide, then it must be equally trained on to the same hours as your primary service that you offer. Let that be the golden rule for any public safety agency that offers multiple disciplines of rescue. If you cannot maintain equal training hours for all services offered, then you should consider offering only the services that can only be trained on properly. Loss of life is tragic, but loss of life due to improper training, certification and equipment is inexcusable.

So we find ourselves at the crossroads of what tugs on everyone's heart who wears the uniform. To respond or not to respond? To get in the water with the wrong credentials or to try to save a life. A simple internet search should answer this question for all of us. Those that want to establish a professionally certified water rescue unit should seek out the experts in your area to establish training and certification classes, but it doesn't stop there. Written water rescue SOP's, policies and guidelines must be created and adhered to at any and all costs. Proper funding must be secured to purchase life sustaining equipment for work in this hazardous environment. Just as men walk in space with specific technical equipment, water rescue personnel need specific technical equipment to allow them to work and operate in some of the harshest conditions on the planet. This is something that is not up for discussion and should never be taken lightly. Dive gear that has been used since the 70s and 80s doesn't provide the proper safety and life sustaining ability that modern equipment manufacturers have worked to perfect for decades. Training hours should not be short cut either. Actual water rescue scenarios may be the lowest call volume for your service or for some it may be the only service you provide. From the single water rescue activation per year for your service to the numerous water rescue activated units per year, training must be frequent and often. Individual self rescue drills must be included and drilled frequently. In my EMS service each paramedic, before the start of their shift each day, intubate an ACLS mannequin just so at least once during their shift they have touched and manipulated their life saving equipment. It is not uncommon that we go into our back parking lot and practice donning PFDs and practice throwing rope bags to each other. The incorporation of daily unique training opportunities not only helps to maintain individual specific skills, but also helps the mind set that comes with the job that we all are here to do: To save lives and most importantly, to come back safe and wake up the next day to do it all again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Falavolito is the Chief of White Oak EMS and Commanding Officer of WOSAR just outside of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, USA. Paul is a certified PADI Master Scuba Diver Trainer and also holds Swift Water Rescue Operations certification, Commercial Diving certification as well as diving instructor credentials for CMAS, Public Safety Divers Association and IANTD. Paul is also a public speaker in the US on the subjects of search & rescue and public safety diving.



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Trapped on floating ice

Sweden faces some of the coldest winters in Europe, and Stockholm Fire and Rescue Service needs to be prepared for a multitude of water and ice rescue incidents. Luckily, the FRS is equipped with an essential rescue tool that has proven its worth during many rescue operations. Stockholm Rescue diver Andreas Lundh recalls a recent incident in which the Mayday-Hansa-Board saved a life once again.



February 6th 2010, An alarm call comes in at 01:30 AM in the morning at Stockholm Fire Service's HQ. A man was trapped on floating ice in the middle of the river Essingen in Stockholm. He'd decided to take a short cut over the ice on his way back home after a night out, failing to notice that the river was heavily trafficked by tug boats and ice breakers. Due to the extreme cold the ice flows had quickly frozen, giving the appearance of offering safe passage. It was already too late by the time he'd noticed an icebreaker at a distance, and that the ice was breaking right under his feet.

An incident where a person is trapped on floating ice is of the highest priority for Stockholm Fire and Rescue Service, and immediately efforts were put in place to locate the distressed

person. After some time the man was found near a bridge on the River Essingen, balancing on a small ice flow that was nearly succumbing to his weight.

"We had to assess the situation, and we decided that the fastest way to retrieve the man in distress was to mobilise the Mayday-Hansa-Board, a flotation device derived from a surfboard, which has proven to be an invaluable tool for our water and ice rescue team over the years," recalls Andreas Lundh, who was attending the incident that night. "We secured the Mayday-Hansa-Board with a 300-metre rescue line to the shore, so we could retrieve the rescuer and victim as fast as possible. On shore, our team of rescue divers was ready to step in at any time, in case something went wrong." While the man was standing on the ice flow, fighting for his life, and trying to keep still, the rescuers feared that the motion from the rescue board could easily upset the balance of the ice flow, causing the rescuer who manned the device to choose for an extra careful approach. Luckily, he managed to get close to the man, and urged him to carefully grab the shafts on the front of the board. Despite his shock and terror, he still managed to climb on the Mayday-Hansa-Board easily, and he only got his feet wet in the process. The rescuer then gave the sign to pull them both back to safety on shore, where the man received immediate medical check-ups. The rest of the team proceeded to check if there were any other casualties. The respective patient was diagnosed as suffering from hypothermia, and was immediately transported to hospital to be treated. Andreas Lundh explains that this incident could have ended up with tragic consequences, but thanks to the right equipment and the professional conduct of the rescue team the patient was unharmed. "With the Mayday-Hansa-Board as a life insurance, I can focus on the rescue operation without anxiety for my own safety, and this is a main condition for being able to go out in a dangerous situation to carry out a professional rescue operation."

Mayday-Hansa-Board: background

The Mayday-Hansa-Board was developed by Swedish company Mayday Scandinavia AB back in the 1980s after the inventor saw ways of improving and adapting a surfboard for water and ice rescue. Over the years it evolved to be an environmentally-friendly high tech product developed in cooperation with the Swedish professional life rescue teams at Sweden's fire and rescue services, the Life Rescue Association and insurance company Trygg-Hansa.

This patented product enjoys an immense popularity with fire and rescue services all over the northern European countries, and global demand is increasing by the day. This popularity is not in the least due to the board's flexibility, as it can be used with helicopters and as a compliment to rescue boats, saving many people and animals over the years.

In Sweden, the Mayday-Hansa-Board is even included in the official training programme for professional rescuers, and nearly every fire department is equipped with a Mayday-Hansa-Board for rescue operations on all types of water, frozen or liquid, at sea or on a lake, and even in swiftwater and mud rescue operations. In addition, every Swedish first response vehicle carries a Mayday-Hansa-Board onboard.

MAYDAY-HANSA-BOARD

- THE BOARD THAT SAVES LIVES

Using the MAYDAY-HANSA-BOARD, a rescuer can quickly and safely save someone in distress. The board is lightweight and handy and can easily be carried the shortest route to the scene of the accident, regardless of types terrain and water — through undergrowth, snow, open water, over ice that holds and ice that does not, to the edge of the ice, along quays and embankments etc. Once at the scene of the accident, the rescuer readily pulls the person in distress up onto the board which can then be pulled ashore by assisting personell. The board can also be used as a sleigh or stretcher. The MAYDAY-HANSA-BOARD functions as unique combination of devices for simple, swift and safe rescue in water and on ice.




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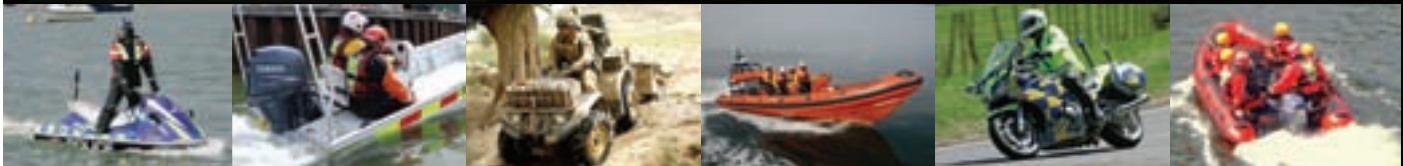


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