

An Auxiliary divers purpose

By LCdr Vanessa Garon PCGA

The Philippine Coast Guard Auxiliary is very proud to have an officer like Capt Matthew Caldwell, of the 116th squadron. Having been introduced to the PCGA back in 2004, it did not take him long to find his pivotal role in this volunteer organization.

In February of 2004, the Super Ferry 14 passenger ferry caught fire and sank off the shores of Bataan. The PCG was the first to respond and they made a call for volunteer divers to inspect the wreck. The 116th PCGA squadron was asked to provide divers and the first 2 civilian divers responded, myself and then LCdr Caldwell.

We dove the shallow wreck as the ship was still burning. Personal belongings were scattered on the ocean floor and paint was peeling off the sides of the ship as it burned from the inside. LCdr Caldwell spotted several small cylinders and suspected that the fire must have been caused by a bomb or some sort of explosion. It was later reported that the sinking was a terrorist attack and an Islamic separatist group claimed responsibility. About 116 lives were lost and many bodies were trapped inside the vessel.

Several years later on June of 2008, another ship mishap occurred. The sinking of the passenger ferry the MV Princess of the Stars, with 800 passengers missing and trapped inside the ship. This search and retrieval operation would test Caldwell's skills. He brought me and my sister Ensign Alexandra Garon along to compose his dive team. We were both certified in advanced nitrox under him.

Our team was airlifted to the site and Caldwell who is wreck certified was determined to penetrate the ship that was overturned. With all our gear and nitrox filled tanks in tow, we successfully made two dives. I took underwater videos and Caldwell accompanied by two PCG divers penetrated the wreck. Though they were unsuccessful in retrieving bodies, he was able to give the PCG divers valuable information in locating the remaining bodies. After a day of diving, all divers both PCG and PCGA were pulled out due to the discovery of toxic pesticides in the water. We were then airlifted to Manila to undergo some medical tests. Luckily, all were cleared of the toxic chemical.

Having recently been promoted to Captain, Matt has always loved diving. He was certified in 1979. In the years that followed, he honed his diving skills and holds an ANDI and SSI trimix instructor certification. He is also an IANTD Trimix diver and has done more than a thousand dives.

Diving is just a hobby for Matt. He loves the ocean and marine life. He is an electrical engineer by profession and a very successful executive for a well-known semiconductor company. He manages about a thousand employees that work under him.

After the Princess of the stars sinking, Capt Caldwell saw the need to create an Emergency Response Dive Team (ERT). The PCGA divers were always called in as the PCG's back up in SAR missions because these volunteer divers have better equipment and have more resources readily available. Capt Caldwell saw the importance of readiness and more intensive training.

His efforts paid off. The 116th squadron was given the task to create a team of divers that could respond within several hours of a tragedy. Capt Caldwell headed this team and conducted several trainings, and even tied up with the PNP Maritime group, the US navy and of course, our counterparts in the PCG to conduct joint training exercises.

When the call came in on Christmas eve, December 24, that a passenger ferry sank shortly after leaving Manila bay, Capt Caldwell was more ready than ever. The PCG called for him and needed his help as they had no way of locating the sunken vessel. All they knew was the last known location until the vessel was no longer responding. Early the next morning Capt Caldwell boarded a PCG ship with his modern equipment in tow. Working in tandem with the PCG, and with the use of his sonar and fish finder, they were able to locate the wreck.

He then decided to dive and see for himself. It was a dangerous dive as he knew he would have to do it alone. Two PCG divers could only stay with him until 120feet, as he proceeded to descend to 220 feet alone. He found the vessel sitting eerily on the sandy bottom. With double tanks and using a gas mix of nitrox and oxygen, he knew that he had a very short bottom time because of the depths he was at. He circled the wreck twice and saw about a dozen bodies that were just within his reach. After 16 minutes at the bottom he began his ascent which took a while as he had to do his decompression stops along the way.

When he returned to the PCG vessel he briefed the PCG on what he saw. The days that followed were hard. The wait made it difficult as he had the desire to return and retrieve the bodies. When the PCG finally gave the order Capt Caldwell and his team of 3 ERT divers conducted a retrieval operation. Using his close circuit re-breather, his 3 companions stayed with him until 120 feet. Again he descended alone and was able to bring up two bodies singlehandedly.

Captain Caldwell's efforts are truly heroic because he was willing to put his safety on the line in order to help give families who have lost their loved ones closure. In the PCGA, there is a saying that every member must be willing to give his TIME, TALENT, and TREASURE. Captain Caldwell has given way beyond what is required. He has given of himself and his diving has its purpose. Not only is he a guardian of the sea, but a guardian of those who have been lost by unfortunate circumstances.