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Provincetown Rescue Squad

By Susan Areson

Provincetown Rescue Squad Lieutenant Ronnie Motta remembers that on one of his first calls as a member of the rescue squad he watched squad members bring a heart attack victim back to life.

Ronnie White, captain of the rescue squad, can proudly reel off the names of at least five people who live in Provincetown whom the rescue squad has brought back to life that way. White and Motta are long-standing members of the rescue squad. Despite shaky beginnings it has established its reputation in the last 26 years as one of the most vital and competent organizations in Provincetown. Only one of the original members, Jimmy Meads, is still on the squad.

The squad was officially started in 1953 by Ronnie White's father, Bob White. Townspeople, however, were against the idea because they wanted the police department to handle rescue calls. White persisted, ignoring comments that a rescue squad would only consist of "glory seekers" and would fold within a year. Twelve men from the fire department volunteered for the squad and the American Red Cross sent an instructor to Provincetown to give the men first-aid training. All of the men became certified in first aid after a basic course, followed by an advanced 12-week course.

The rescue squad at first had no equipment but did its best to improvise while raising money to buy gear. The squad used an old 1940 Ford truck from Pumper Station No. 3 and equipped it with several old Army stretchers, a first aid kit that held mainly surplus gauze and bandages, an old pulmotor owned by the fire department and a resuscitator. Sometimes patients had to be transported in private cars, Motta said.

The squad was given \$50 at Town Meeting in 1953 as a fire department budget item. All of its members also belong to the fire department. Determined to raise the money to equip the squad, the members held bake sales, raffles and dinner parities to build up the rescue squad fund.

Avid poker players on the squad even agreed to donate five cents from each kitty to the fund. Members who were paid to accompany patients to the hospital in the Lower Cape Ambulance donated that money to the rescue fund.

Squad members in those days were alerted to rescue calls by phone operators who always seemed to know where they could reach the individual members. But as the squad established its reputation townspeople began to put more faith in it. At the 1958 Town Meeting voters approved money to buy and equip a rescue truck. At the next Special Town Meeting voters approved buying 20 "beeper" radios to alert squad members to calls.

The 23-member squad now has a van ambulance and a modular ambulance, which was bought with an \$18,000 federal grant under the Highway Safety Act. The squad also bought a jaws-of-life extricating machine a year ago with money donated by a committee of townspeople. Support from townspeople and businesses for the rescue squad through private donations has been fantastic, White said. Most of the rescue squad equipment is paid for from private donations, not from the town.

The all-volunteer squad now spends almost one-third of its budget from the town in training and refresher courses. There are four paramedics and 11 Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT's) on the squad. But the problem, White said, is that state laws now require EMT's to accompany patients to the hospital and is making the requirements for becoming a rescue squad member even more stringent. When the squad started all that was required was a 12-hour first-aid course. The required first-aid course now takes 52 hours. EMT's need 100 hours of training and paramedics need 500 hours of training. The training must also be supplemented by refresher courses.

These requirements are a lot to ask of the volunteer squad in addition to time spent out on rescue calls and at meetings. "The state is literally forcing us to go to a paid rescue squad," Motta said. "It's just a matter of time."

While squad members are proud of their professional training and the reputation they have built for themselves, Motta and White say the squad is now so busy there is less time for relaxing and socializing.

The poker games that used to go until all hours of the night after the squad's meetings twice a month are a thing of the past. Even the dinners the members used to take turns cooking before those meetings have been replaced by meeting at restaurants.

The meetings, which often last four hours, are devoted to discussing handling of recent rescue calls, reviewing operating procedures on equipment, drills, equipment maintenance and any other business.

The old times have not been forgotten, though. Whenever the men get together they trade stories about each other's cooking ability. Jimmy Meads made his reputation as a chef for his Cornish-hen dinners. White is remembered as the steak chef.

Rescue squad members have a tradition of innovative rescue drills, owing mostly to White's vivid imagination. Drills have included everything from rescuing a stranded worker from the top of the standpipe to pulling someone out of a well. The drills come over the radio as a regular rescue call and the squad members often don't realize the call is a fake until they have worked on the rescue attempt for several minutes. The "victims" are often dressed up with fake wounds and blood.

But even after the men realize the call is fake they continue working as if it were real. White and Motta have a great time thinking up fake rescues. They often solicit the help of boy scouts or a member's wife or girlfriend to serve as victims. The people who are most annoyed when they learn the rescue is only a drill are the spectators, White said.

Once when the squad was having a drill on rescuing drowning victims, using the pool at the Provincetown Inn, an actual drowning call came over the radio. The men abandoned their drill and went scurrying down the breakwater to pull a woman out of the water.

The most unusual call, according to White, was when John Thomas scaled the outside of the Provincetown Monument in the early morning hours. Thomas could not get inside at the top of the monument. One squad



Advocate photo by Susan Areson

(l. to r.) Phil Roderick, Ursula Silva, Clem Silva, Lt. Ronnie Motta, Adam Wolf, Jessie Ferreira, Kenny Dutra, Cpt. Ronnie White, Layne Mosner, Francis Avila, Jim Meads. Not pictured: Estelle Alberts, Bill Burrell,

member, after running all the way to the top with a hacksaw to cut the bar and let Thomas inside, broke the blade and had to run down and get another one.

Another unusual call, White said, was when a man dove to the bottom of the pool at the Moors Motel and got stuck to the suction drain at the bottom of the pool. The man was pulled from the pool with suction marks from the drain on his chest.

Motta said six or seven members of the squad usually show up for calls, sometimes at the expense of having

their pay docked or getting far behind in completing a job.

Time off for a rescue call averages about an hour and often three or four when EMT's or paramedics have to make the trip to Hyannis in the rescue truck.

The rescue squad is supplemented by the services of the Lower Cape Ambulance Service, which transports all patients to the hospital. The rescue squad usually takes patients only as far as the local clinic or to a doctor's office. But often when the ambulance is already out on a trip to the hospital the rescue truck is used to take patients to Hyannis. Often the truck meets the ambulance on its return trip and transfers the patient.

During the summer there is an incredible jump in the number of rescue calls because of the influx of people. The squad has two paid members on duty from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m. for 10 weeks in the summer to handle the majority of the calls that come in then.

The other volunteers are called into action when there are several calls at the same time. The number of calls increases every year, from 23 in 1953 when the squad started to 782 in 1978. White and Motta attribute the dedication of the volunteer workers to the satisfaction of helping others and to squad members' personal experience with accidents. The letters and thanks they receive from both townspeople and out-of-towners who use rescue squad services "makes it all worthwhile," Motta said.