



## How I Became An Ocean Lifeguard

Submitted by: SRT Steve Yarzinsky ( OCBP Rookie 2011)

I was gasping for breath, disoriented and, from what I could see in the blurry moments my head was above water, alone in the ocean. Making it back to shore was becoming increasingly uncertain. I was so tired from swimming that my left arm was no longer lifting out of the water. There was no stroke anymore — just grabbing water and pushing it behind me. At that moment I realized that success (or in this case my survival) was going to depend on my mind. There was nothing left in my body (or so I thought) so it was my determination to keep moving, no matter what, that was going to get me back on land.

This was try-out day for the Ocean City, Maryland Beach Patrol and it was the first of what would be a long series of physical and mental tests that would reshape my career, my body and in many ways my life. I was given fair warning just as all the applicants were. We were told it would be a hard, maybe the hardest, day we'd ever had. We were told that our chances of passing this pre-qualification phase were not good. We were told that we would be scrutinized at every moment — from our performance to our appearance to our composure and attitude. It was impressed upon us that no matter how fit we were, we would soon meet our limit. Finally, we were told that, even if we were successful on this first day of pre-selection, it would only be the beginning of the challenges to come. No one was going to become a lifeguard unless the Captain himself believed he could trust his own family's safety with one of us. So, on a brilliant sunny and warm June morning, I began the most thrilling and rewarding adventure I could have hoped for.

From childhood through my teenage years I admired the ocean lifeguards of the beach town that was my inherited second home. They were invariably fit, uniformly calm and they projected a powerful mystique. Some of that allure comes from their position both physically and socially: sitting atop eight-foot chairs they literally tower over the thousands of beachgoers they are responsible for. It also comes from the exclusive nature of their group: it is a fraternity of carefully chosen members who even have their own language (flag semaphore). Of course, the most exciting component of this fascination was watching the frequent and sometimes frightening rescues that they perform. Ocean City is a fantastic family vacation town with over two miles of boardwalk, ten miles of beach, rolling waves — and notoriously strong rip-currents! Sit on the beach in late summer when deep Atlantic storms push dramatic waves toward inexperienced swimmers and you can be guaranteed a demonstration of the speed, strength and skill of these life-

guards. While the excitement can be appreciated by anyone, it takes a special kind of person to volunteer for it. I was about to find out if I was that kind of person.

Becoming a lifeguard with the OCBP begins with try-out day or "Pre-Employment Physical Skills Evaluation". To make the first cut, applicants must qualify themselves in a timed run and swim. If successful, the candidate proceeds immediately into a 6-hour, high-intensity workout wherein new skills must be learned quickly and demonstrated with precision. Mock rescues, carrying live "victims" out of the surf and learning to think and communicate clearly in high stress situations are all parts of this daylong event. Stamina is critical too as is a good attitude. When your strength is spent and your lungs are exhausted you still have to be able to go in and make a rescue with confidence. The relentless intensity of try-out day begs each lifeguard hopeful to ask himself or herself the question, "Is this really what you want to do?"

The first time I answered that question for myself was during the timed swim on try-out day. A quarter mile of open water lay ahead of us and ten minutes were on the clock. This is barely a warm-up for a competitive swimmer and indeed it is considered a standard workout within the beach patrol. Yet this test weeds out the greatest number of would-be lifeguards. For me it was daunting to say the least. I possessed a high level of fitness but I was not a competitive swimmer and my preparation for this particular event consisted of a mere two weeks of swim practice. So it was more than a little intimidating to find myself jockeying for position in a mass start of splashing swimmers. I remember getting kicked. I remember being yelled at not to break stroke by the veteran guards following us in kayaks. Mostly I remember feeling tired early on. The timed run just minutes before the swim and general nerves from the competition had sapped much of my lung power. What was I doing here? The discomfort of swallowing saltwater quickly became the least of my problems.

Following the chaos at the starting line, natural selection played its roll in spreading the swimmers apart. I chose to focus on the peacefulness of being out of sight from other swimmers rather than on the scariness of it. I had no idea where I was in the pack. I was just somewhere in the ocean making my way toward a finish line I couldn't see. The urge to breathe was rapidly exceeding my capacity to take in air. The only thing I had control of was my thoughts. Some swimmers count, some sing songs in their heads. I kept picturing the finish line and being able to tell the friends and family I was going to face at the end of the day that I had made it. The majority of the swim amounted to a long repetition of sun, breath and darkness as my head turned and my arms pulled. It was a rhythm interrupted at first occasionally and later constantly by my diminishing strength.

Candidates who make it through try-out day are invited to Surf Rescue Academy. It is an intensive program designed to teach all the skills necessary to perform the job. Academy endeavors to turn each student into a Surf Rescue Technician which is the title given to working lifeguards on the Patrol. That was my goal. The more of myself I invested, the more I wanted that title. I was pouring my body into it. I was retraining my mind

for it. Every new day of training was asking me to do something I thought was going to be out of my reach. Then, by the time I was in bed at night, that particular fear simply became another notch under my belt. More importantly, those fears became small once they were behind me compared to how they appeared when in front of me. It was a phenomenon that I became familiar with and used to motivate myself as I went along: Whatever seemed overwhelming at first was sure to become perfectly manageable very soon. Something I did throughout Academy was use the memory of that first day swim to keep myself on track when things got difficult...

Someone from a kayak was screaming something. With my ears underwater, it was impossible to tell what it was. All I could think about was making it around the far end of the fishing pier — the point at which I knew I could finally make the turn and begin swimming toward shore. They kept yelling but what was it? Encouragement? Was it criticism for being slow? Was the race already over? As my head rolled one way and then the other to breathe, I caught random words: "pier", "close", "watch", "out". My head rolled again and, as I caught a breath, I saw a view I'd never seen before. I was looking straight up at wooden pilings that towered over me like trees in a forest. The pier was a black silhouette against a bright blue sky and I could see the outline of spectators looking down on me. With every second counting, I wanted to make a close turn around the pier but now I was dangerously close. As the waves pitched high and low, I could see the jagged mussel shells that covered the pilings sawing their way through the water. Unless I found sudden strength to sprint off course, they were going to saw their way through me!

Having made it through Academy with all the training and passing all the tests we were treated to "Rookie Graduation". In true beach patrol fashion, it was more of a workout than a ceremony. We showed up three hours before work to run a gauntlet of challenges including swimming out to a Coast Guard boat, riding the Jet Ski rescue sled and performing land and water rescue drills. It was an exciting morning that culminated with shaking the hand of the Captain as our names were called. Making it through Rescue Academy gets you onto the beach but you're still not an SRT. Like all rookies, I still had to work past my probation status if I wanted to be fully instated but there was no way I would let myself fail. By this point in the journey,



Captain Arbin shakes every rookie's hand as they complete Rookie Graduation.

success was something that I had gained a real taste for. It was a flavor that was put into my mouth the day of the try-out swim. That, and the taste of saltwater.

I didn't see the finish line approaching so much as I heard it. The lieutenant in charge of the stopwatch was known for his booming voice and his tireless vocalizations. This is a real asset in a sport where swimmers are plotting their direction based on brief "sightings" taken between stokes and breaks in the waves. I could have been swimming toward the sun-splashed beach or I could already have been dead and was simply moving toward "the light". I wouldn't have known otherwise without him yelling, "Keep swimming! Move, move!". One of my hands caught the sandy bottom on the downstroke. It was shallow enough for me to stand and run. I rose out of the water but couldn't see any of the other racers. Was I last? Had everyone gone home? "Move! Move! Move!". So I moved. I hustled. I tried to make my gritting teeth look like a smile (attitude counts). I had thought I was out of power way back at the mid-point of the swim and yet here I was pumping my feet in a sprint up the beach to the flags. "Run and grab a buoy. Then run back to the water". No sooner had my nose passed the finish line then I was given these instructions. More running? My pulse was still pounding in my ears. Someone vomited behind me but I didn't see who it was. Where was everybody? I did as I was told and lined up with a small group of dripping athletes, holding our buoys and sucking deep breaths through deceptively calm faces. The lieutenant told us to kneel down and began to give us instructions on how to handle our buoys. That was the moment it dawned upon me that not only had I just made it past the qualifiers, I was just beginning the day's work!

Out of 150 applicants, 60 showed up at the starting line with me that day. In the end, 14 made it through training and were given the chance to earn their place on a lifeguard stand as first-year SRTs. I'm proud to say I was one of them. I can tell you that sitting in the lifeguard stand is immensely satisfying. The view and the responsibility that come with it are even greater than I

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SRT Yarzinsky is cheered on by the Beach Patrol as he runs through the channel culminating his Rookie Graduation.

# Information/Statistics

## From the Other side of the Desk

Submitted by: Lt. Skip Lee

As many of you know, I have another career away from Ocean City with the Anne Arundel County Public School System. I taught in the classroom for 18 years and am now in my fifth year as a Central Office administrator. I thoroughly enjoy my new role and draw on a lot of leadership experiences I have had here with the Beach Patrol.

Much like in Ocean City, I am also responsible for testing, interviewing and hiring candidates for many different positions within the school system. Sometimes I screen candidates, other times I travel and recruit while still other times I serve as a panel expert during the hiring process. But not until this fall have I actually had the opportunity to write a job description, post the position and watch with excitement as people from within the system and literally across the county applied for the position. For you see, this is the first time anyone has retired from the Office of Health, Physical Education and Dance since I was hired back in 2007.

The process has been extremely enlightening. I have learned a lot about people and about the state of our economy and society and I want to share some insight with you. Just a couple of points in order for this to make sense and please understand I am not presently recruiting for this position, it's already been filled. But I think you might learn from the experience and possibly apply it to future hiring opportunities.

First, the position is for a Health Education Resource Teacher and we required a Bachelor's degree (Masters preferable) in Health Education, Health Science or Community Health. Next, we required three letters of recommendation and three SUCCESSFUL years of teaching in the health field. The candidate needed to be eligible for a Maryland State Department of Education Teaching Certificate. And finally, the candidate must sometimes be able to work independently, sometimes as a team player and often within deadline constraints. (It's the nature of the position with all the grant writing and administrative responsibilities.) There were, of course, a complete list of expectations, too many to list here, but important to note above that which was already stated.

So the applications started arriving and I opened the electronic files with excitement and high expectation. Unfortunately, that enthusiasm quickly turned into frustration and bewilderment. You would not have believed who was applying for this position. I had hairdressers who said they had Health Education in High School. I had retired nurses who told me about their years of experience in the operating room but never made the connection to Health Education. I had a Science teacher from another state who said she was a "quick-study" and would take the Praxis and add Health to her certification and then apply for a Maryland Certificate. There were 47 applications in all and I read every one of them. I felt it was my duty and obligation although I must admit, I quickly learned that by going to the

Employment Experience section of the resume, I could predict who might be a better candidate.

We narrowed the field to six candidates and I purposefully excluded myself from the preliminary interviews. I did, however, create the interview questions and the grading rubrics for the people I recruited to serve on the panel and they narrowed the pool to two. Oh, and please know that prior to the interview, I scheduled all six to report 60 minutes BEFORE their interview. And you know early is on-time, right? When they arrived, I had them provide a writing sample on a Health Education Professional Staff Development initiative, lift and carry a set of text books, a document camera and a binder to the storage closet, answer a phone as if they had the job and tell my administrative assistant about their most exciting Health Education related experience.

In the end, we were able to hire a really strong person who brings a wealth of experience, knowledge and motivation to the position and we are all excited to refocus our energies on the work at hand.

So, why did I share this with you? There are some observations I made along the way that I feel every candidate for any job should know. I am not telling you how to interview but I might have a suggestion or two that would help you in the interview process. Here goes.

1. Know EVERYTHING you can possibly know about the position for which you are applying. Do your homework. Investigate the position. Ask questions. Call the employer directly and get clarification. Be Prepared.
2. Read the Job Description!!!
3. Write a resume specifically for the position for which you are applying. Make sure the OBJECTIVE has the actual company in the text. (One of the resumes I received had the name of another school system in the first sentence.) Be sure that the work experiences you include support what it is that you are seeking. More is not necessarily better.
4. Participate in mock interviews – you can even make up the questions and have friends deliver them. While it is important what you say during the interview, the manner in which you speak and the confidence you portray are just as important.
5. If you don't know anything about a question you are asked during an interview, don't make it up. You *might* demonstrate creativity and the ability to handle stressful situations if you do but you are more likely to make a bad impression to the panel if what you say is so far off of what they have heard from other candidates.
6. Dress Professionally. It still matters! The way you appear for that first impression, like it or not, still has an effect on the panelists. I know there are computer-programming jobs where you are forbidden to wear anything but jeans but chances are that the next interview you do will not be for Google. Relax. Yes, I know and appreciate how difficult times are these days and I see the desperation on people's faces when it comes to "just getting a job" but really, relax. It speaks volumes about you, about your future work ethic and about what the company might expect out of you.

Oh yeah, one more thing. Make sure the letters of recommendation you have other people write for you do not start off with “To whom it may concern.” If you want a really good letter of recommendation, provide the person you are asking to write the letter with information about you, the person (audience) who is receiving the letter to include that person’s name, their address and title and a little bit about why it is that you are applying for the position. Captain Arbin is outstanding in communicating how your position here with the Beach Patrol has been the best preparation for the position for which you are applying. Don’t be afraid to ask or forget to ask for a letter of recommendation when you decide it is time to go for that career-type job.

I wish you all the best.

**Captain’s note:** This is all great information and will help you as you apply for any position. However, I want to provide you with a few additional hints in general for any position you are hoping to get. Make sure you have a professional e-mail address for the purpose of any contact with perspective employers. I receive



**Some Simple Analysis of Ocean City Recreation Bather “Neck/Back” Incidents**

Submitted by: Sgt. Jamie Falcon

Last spring, I put together some statistics from our incident reports from 2000 through 2010. Now that another season has passed, I have redone these statistics.

Whenever a bather has symptoms, from an abrasion on the shoulders or above to paralysis, our personnel investigate the possibility of a spinal injury. At the request of the bather, or if symptoms warrant, our personnel request EMS; Paramedics and the patient then determine the need for further care.

I have looked over every accident report since 2000 and identified all of those that indicated a “neck/back” call. I am writing a public policy Ph.D. dissertation on spinal injuries to recreational bathers. The statistics listed here may, or may not be, part of my paper. I have submitted this for the newsletter because I think these are interesting and I am confident some of other newsletter readers might be interested too.

In 2011, we had 149 neck/back incidents. Over the 12 year time period, there have been 1105 neck/back incidents.

It should be understood that the benchmark number of visitors per season is 4 million. The likelihood of a visitor being involved in a neck/back incident is *two thousandths of one percent*.

Shallow Diving

Shallow diving is a less frequent cause, but these incidents are more severe relative to body boarding or non-shallow diving incidents.

There were 55 incidents attributed to shallow diving, or 4.98%. But, of all medevaced, 18.6% are attributed to shallow diving. So, a category amounting to 5% accounts for nearly 20% of the apparent severe injuries. Of shallow diving, 52%, with age reported, are between 16 and 21 (inclusive). So, a five year age group accounts for over half of the more-dangerous category of shallow diving. Of all neck/back incidents 76% involve a male, but 91% of shallow diving patients

are male. about 1,000 e-mail inquiries each year for positions with the Beach Patrol and am amazed at why a prospective employee would think sending me an e-mail from [1hotstud@hotmail.com](mailto:1hotstud@hotmail.com) was acceptable. A second issue for prospective employees is the social networking media. Many employers will begin with a background search on the most popular sites and if you have content that is not what they believe to be appropriate you will never get that interview. One final area of caution is the ease of doing an internet search for any court cases. Anyone can search by your name and have a listing of all your contact with the police or the judicial system. What you have done in your past is an employer’s prediction of what type of employee they can expect in the future. Good luck with landing any job that you are going for!

are male.

Drugs or Alcohol

The data makes it clear that drugs or alcohol tend to go with risky behavior or likely more severe injuries. Drugs or alcohol were believed to be a contributing factor in 1.36% of all of the incidents. However, drugs and alcohol were believed to be a contributing factor in 33.3% shallow diving incidents. Of all medevaced patients, drugs and alcohol were believed to be a contributing factor in 5.9%.

Patient status at transfer to EMS (Final outcome not known)

- 32.3% refused treatment or self-transport
- 50.3% ambulance to AGH
- 5% ambulance to PRMC
- 9.2% medevaced
- (about 4% do not have a destination reported)

Age and Summary

	Shal-low Diving	Shal-low Diving Medevaced	Not Shallow Diving	Not Shallow Diving Medeva ced	All Medi-vaced	All Neck/ Back Inci-dents
Median Age:	20	22	19	45	44	20
Average Age:	22	26	27	43	40	28
Minimum Age:	9	16	4	8	8	4
Maximum Age:	53	52	85	74	74	85
Number:	55	17	1001	79	96	1105
Percent of All Neck/ Backs	5.0%	1.7%	95.0%	7.5%	9.2%	100.0 0%