



A Lifeguard's Beach Safety Tips

by Sgt. Ed Fisher
Special to the Dispatch

The writer is a 17-year veteran of the Beach patrol. In the off-season, he is an elementary school teacher in Montgomery County. The OCBP consist of over 200 men and women dedicated to ocean rescue and maintaining a safe and orderly environment on Ocean City's beach. The Sure Rescue Technicians guard the beach seven days a week from 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.



Everybody Out of the Water !

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“17:25.(5:25 p.m.) The Ocean City Beach Patrol is now up and clearing the water.” This message is broadcast daily through the Beach Patrol dispatch center, and immediately followed by all SRT's, covering ten and a half miles of beach, simultaneously whistling and pointing toward the west with semaphore flags. Following the exodus of swimmers, beach patrons with the same questions, “what’s going on?” or, “why are you clearing the water?” approach many of our lifeguards.

Our beach patrol has always taken efforts to let swimmers know when we were off duty. That has included, and continues to include, published hours and a community supported education campaign. Until 1999, we stood on the platforms of our chairs for the last five minutes of each day (we are off duty at 5:30pm). That practice had been in place for at least forty years and the idea was to indicate to the bathers, still in the ocean, that the lifeguards were about to leave. According to Captain Arbin, the average number of after-hours drownings was as high as 3-4 per summer. In 1999, by suggestion of Dennis Dare, the City Manager, we began completely clearing the ocean before our departure. Since we implemented the clearing policy, the average drownings per summer has fallen to 1 or 2, in spite of increases in beach population with thankfully none this year.

Through July and August, Ocean City, Maryland will host approximately 3 million visitors. The average weekly number of visitors in town, at any time in July or August, is three hundred thousand. We are a high volume resort area. Although the police patrol the beach for criminal activity, there is no provision in the city code that restricts swimming when the Beach Patrol is off duty. It is not unusual for the police, fire/E.M.S or our off-duty personnel to make evening rescues or to be involved with C.P.R. related to a drowning. In fact this year there have also been several close calls when individuals chose to swim while the beach patrol was off duty, but luckily for these individuals their lack of respect for the ocean was not paid for by their life. However, the following 3 stories illustrate the tragic outcome when adults make poor, life altering decisions.

In late July 2007 at 6:30 pm on a Sunday evening, a family of six were enjoying the end of a wonderful beach day. One hour earlier guards on duty at the inlet beach cleared the water of all swimmers including this family before going off duty for the day. The parents allowed 2 sons to take another dip in the ocean. Currents near the inlet jetty began to pull the two boys away from shore. Seeing the boys struggle, their father entered the ocean attempting to help as the mother holding an infant with a 2 year old reaching for her watched helplessly as her husband and 2 oldest children were being swept further and further away from shore. Although witnesses called 911 and passing private boats attempted to help the father was found floating lifeless at the mouth of the inlet. In this case, the two boys were rescued but this family has been changed forever.

At 5:50pm, one evening in September, 2006, some of our personnel who had not yet turned off their radios, responded to a 911 call 6 miles north of the inlet. A family had just returned to Ocean City from a daylong trip, and wanted to take a quick swim before dinner. It is possible that they passed our lifeguard as he walked off the beach. The father and three daughters entered the ocean directly in a rip current. Family members on shore saw them in distress and dialed 911. The Coast Guard was dispatched by communications, and several of our personnel converged on the location in their private vehicles. One daughter made it to shore on her own, and Paramedic Del Baker rescued another. Sgt. Cawthern, SRT Ben Doukas and Paramedic Baker were able to locate the bodies of the father and the other daughter. Doukas initiated C.P.R. on the Coast Guard boat, but without success.

One morning in 2005, just thirty minutes before we went on duty, a mother made an attempt to rescue her two sons from a rip current. When our personnel arrived, an off-duty fireman reported that he had brought the children to shore after finding them clinging to their mother. The mother did not survive.

Surely, after-hours drownings can occur on any beach. Like all beach patrols, we do everything we can to reduce these tragic occurrences. Clearly, public education is the key. We hand out thousands of brochures that provide rip current information, safety tips and our hours of operation. We hold weekly Beach Safety Seminars for thousands of our visitors. Our community has shown its support for our efforts, with local businesses posting our hours and safety tips on their marquees.

We have found further success in calling all swimmers ashore before we get off duty. If a policy can save a life, it is a policy we want to use. By clearing the water prior to our departure, any swimmers who do re-enter the ocean know there is no longer a guard watching them. Countless swimmers ask; "Why clear the water?" Their questions then give us the opportunity to remind them to; "Keep your feet in the sand until the lifeguard's in the stand."

Captain Arbin notes that in his 36 years with the Beach Patrol he has known of, or been involved with dozens of drownings and near drownings that have occurred outside our 10:00 – 5:30 "Duty" hours. He says, "The single, strongest message that we try to impress on people is that they should stay out of the ocean when the Beach Patrol is not on duty. I have been personally involved in cases where, if this simple rule had been followed, many lives and families would not have been scarred by such a preventable tragedy, the death of a loved one. Clearing the water at the end of our shift may seem routine, but we must never take the goal of this policy lightly. Before we started clearing the water of swimmers at 5:25, it is very possible that a swimmer could have entered the water while guards were on duty, only to turn around and find the stands empty and pulled back for the night. In most cases this would not be a problem. However, if the swimmer were to become caught in a rip current, the situation could quickly take a tragic turn, despite their intentions to swim only under the watchful eyes of the Beach Patrol. In contrast, by pulling everyone out of the ocean before we leave the beach, we know that those who enter the water during unguarded hours are taking that risk knowingly. It is critical that we continue our efforts to educate the public, warning them of the dangers of

swimming on unguarded beaches, and that we do whatever it takes to make sure people leave the ocean before we make that last turn to the West, leaving our beaches for the night.”