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Alive!



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Into the Deep

LAFD's dive/rescue team was the nation's first, and continues to lead the way.

SEE PAGE 6

Alive! photo by Angel Gomez.



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LAFD divers (from left) Chris Curtis, Al Serpa, John Torres and Gil Garcia.

INTO THE DEEP

The Fire Dept.'s dive/rescue team is specially equipped and trained to extinguish under-wharf fires and make underwater and ship-bound rescues.

Photos by Angel Gomez, Club Member Services Director; Some information courtesy Mark Howell

Water has always been the best antidote to a raging fire. But a lot of water – in the form of a harbor or an ocean – could be too much of a good thing, and actually hinder firefighting. A big body of water places extra hazards into the process.

That was before 1960. Since then, the LAFD has had its own dive/rescue team, the first in the nation. The 18 frontline firefighter/divers place unique water-based duties at the ready, including rescue and fighting fires from below.

HISTORY

In the years following World War II, several major fires occurred in Los Angeles Harbor focusing attention that a well-involved wooden wharf fire was very difficult to extinguish. The Matson

dock fire of St. Patrick's Day, 1960, proved ultimately the genesis of the LAFD's dive/rescue team. The Matson fire caused more than \$3 million in damage.

After that fire, several firefighters who were members of the recreational Neptune Society, a group of recreational divers, were sent on a mission to recover equipment from the Matson activities. Asst. Fire Chief WW Johnston saw how effective the divers were, and put a plan into action that led to the formation of the dive/rescue team.

Incidents in 1963 and 1967, in which major wharf fires were averted due to the team's unique firefighting abilities, cemented the team's reputation and importance.



Diver Chris Curtis splashes for a dive operation while Diver Al Serpa watches.



DEEP

LAFD Dive/Rescue Team

THE *ALIVE!* INTERVIEW

Unique Capabilities

On Thursday, Jan. 13, Club CEO John Hawkins and *Alive!* editor John Burnes sat down for an interview with LAFD Battalion Chief Ray Gomez, who oversees the Fire Dept.'s dive/rescue team. The interview took place at Fire Station 49, which is on the water in Wilmington and houses Fire Boat 3.

Chief Gomez, thanks for demonstrating your team's abilities yesterday. You're battalion chief over what jurisdiction?

BATTALION CHIEF RAY GOMEZ: Basically over the Harbor area. Battalion 6 has 10 fire stations, and it encompasses the San Pedro/Wilmington area and the Harbor City area.

How would you describe your duties, relating to the dive team?

RAY: My official title is a battalion commander. I see myself as a glorified cheerleader, because the dive team members are the ones that do all the work. I just need to know how to use them best, and right now my goal is to provide them the best training, the best equipment, and get them out to practice. We recently had a diver test, so we're going to be able to bring on 12 brand new backup divers. And right now, we're facilitating their training.

Not only am I that glorified cheerleader/facilitator, but we procure the equipment and we procure funds for training. And in an incident – and that's where the serious part of our work is – in an incident, I am the incident commander. I should know how to best use that tool or that resource at an incident. That's basically what our job is. Unfortunately, they don't let us grab a hose and put a fire out anymore, as a battalion chief, and that's one of the laments that I have being battalion chief. We don't put the ladders up. But what is very important is when we get to a fire, we're going to use 10, 15, 20 companies – I've been at incidents where we've used 40-45 companies – we have to manage those resources appropriately. And 100 percent accountability of all our resources is a must. That's what our job is.

Are you a diver?

RAY: A casual diver. Casual. I'm actually certified by PADI.



BELOW: Club CEO John Hawkins interviews Battalion Chief Ray Gomez aboard LAFD Fire Boat 3.

Oh, are you really?

RAY: Yes. But just casual. My wife and I got certified a long time ago here in San Pedro by the same outfit that does some of our training here at Pacific Wilderness in San Pedro, and we dove in Catalina, Hawaii, Costa Rica. Mostly Catalina.

And you were divers before you came down here to be in charge of the dive team?

RAY: Yes. I think I got selected for this spot for a variety of reasons. They have a lot of different programs going on

down here – not only the dive team, but the shipboard firefighting. You need to control or manage the HAZMAT task force. You have to manage the Urban Search and Rescue task force. And then they said, "All right, Ray lives in San Pedro, so we'll put Ray there." Our lives as battalion chiefs are not our own. We don't follow the same protocol that all the other members follow as far as putting in for a spot and you get to stay there based on seniority. If the boss wants me here today, I'm here; if he wants me out in the Valley tomorrow, then I go out to the Valley. If he wants me back downtown, then I go back downtown. That's what you accept as a battalion chief.

– continued page 10

BELOW: LAFD Fire Boat 2 prepares for a wharf sweep.

BELOW, FROM LEFT: Fire Boat 3 dive team Al Serpa and Chris Curtis; and Fire Boat 5 dive team John Torres and Gil Garcia.



1

Deployment of the team.

After a call is received, the divers put on their equipment and enter the water.



2

Equipment delivery.

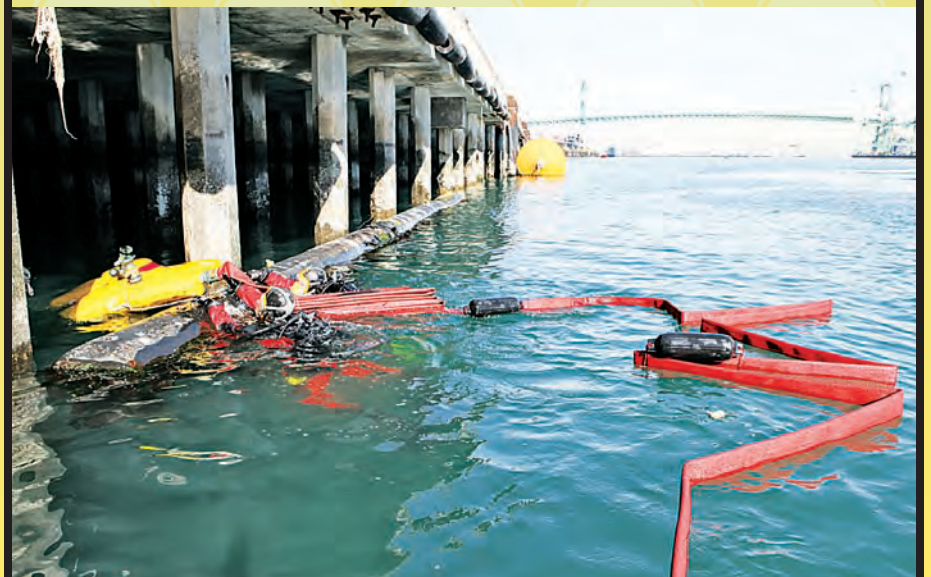
A Fire Boat 2, the largest of the department's fire boats, enters the scene and delivers the equipment. Once the equipment is in the water, Fire Boat 2 retreats.



B The divers retrieve the equipment.



C Using straps, the under-wharf hose floats are stabilized by attaching them to piers or other permanent structures.



STEP-BY-STEP

UNDER-WHARF FIREFIGHTING

In the Water, to the Rescue

The LAFD dive/rescue team is uniquely trained and capable of these tasks – putting out under-wharf fires by blasting water from underneath; and water-based paramedic rescue.

A The hoses are attached to a water source; in this case, an engine company supplies the water. In this scenario, the land-based fire company plays an important role.



3 Turning on the water.

B The water source is turned on, and the nozzles begin drenching the underside of the wharf, creating a fire containment screen.



4 High-powered spraying.

Once the under-wharf fire has been contained, Fire Boat 2 turns on its high-powered nozzles to put out the fire. The nozzles can spray deep or wide, and can be manipulated up or down, and side to side. Each of the two nozzles can spray up to 500 gallons per minute.



BELOW: Club CEO John Hawkins and Battalion Chief Ray Gomez.



THE *ALIVE!* INTERVIEW

- continued from page 7

Are these new divers from Fire Stations in the Harbor area?

RAY: Not all of them. Generally, yes. The firefighters who want to be divers gravitate to this area. But we test throughout the whole City, and anyone can apply.

But they have to be firefighters first.

RAY: Yes. A requirement is spending four years as a firefighter and having some of the certifications, including being able to scuba dive, and once they pass the test – a written test, a practical test – then they come in our program, and we teach them the specifics of our standard operating procedures. Originally our dive program was for fighting under-wharf fires.

We had a lot of wooden wharves in the harbor. That's what the divers originally trained for. As you know, the Harbor Department is doing away with the wooden wharfs and giving us concrete wharfs. So we got direction from our supervisors to make our dive team more flexible, more diverse.

They do both underwater and surface rescue. Just recently, we had a gentleman jump off a dock. Unfortunately, we weren't able to rescue him in time. We think one of the car carrier [ships] nicked him enough to kill him, and then it became a body recovery.

So we do body and evidence recovery. The LAPD does bomb searches. I want our guys to be able to at least recognize that – not necessarily take a bomb apart but be able to recognize it so we can assist the LAPD and the Port Police with those operations.

We have three on-duty dive teams all the time. But we recognize that if we have any kind of an operation, even just a simple small craft crashing into each other out there, and we get people in the water, we're going to use all those teams. We're going to get Port Police to help us, we're going to get the LAPD to help us. We have mutual aid with Long Beach, and they will come over and help. And we want to do the same. That way, if we're all training the same, if we're all looking at the same thing, we can help each other. You

as a citizen will have not three dive teams, but in theory about 10 to 12 dive teams.

How many divers do you have?

RAY: We have three dive teams, and we do the buddy system. So those three dive teams are made up of two divers on each team.

What about other areas of the City?

RAY: Yesterday, two of our mates, who are also divers, went to Castaic Lake for training. We want to see what our operation would be like at Echo Park Lake, Machado Lake, Macarthur Lake. There could be a reason that our dive team gets called out there. What we have planned now is for a helicopter to pick up the dive team and everything the dive team needs and take them to that area.

So you're looking at the possibility of whether you can provide divers for other areas?

RAY: Yes, we are actively seeking to fulfill all of the requirements to meet FEMA Homeland Security requirements to become a FEMA Type I Dive Team that can be deployed all over the country for natural disasters or terrorist threats. We will be the only FEMA Type I team in the western United States and one of two on the West Coast, along with Seattle. It will take additional training and equipment and will be a component of our existing two FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Teams.

Tell us about your training.

RAY: Every single person in the department, including myself, goes through the same 20-week training academy course. And we're all EMTs. Some of us are paramedics. The position down here is firefighter-diver.

The LAFD dive/rescue team, aboard three of the LAFD's fire boats that are used for at-sea firefighting and rescues.



RESPONSIBILITIES

What responsibilities does the dive team have?

RAY: Basically the dive rescue team has the responsibility of assisting and putting out wharf fires, and they have victim rescue duties, on water or under water body and evidence recovery.

I'll give you an example. A Catalina cruise ship leaves the harbor sometimes eight, nine times a day in the height of their season. They carry 250 to 300 souls. If that ship was to go wayward and crash into the breakwater, I'd be positive that I'd have some victims in the water, some injured people. I need divers to go in there and get them. So our divers would take that task.

I have a rapid intervention company on land, but what do I do on the water part of it? So that's another use for our dive team – a rapid intervention company in the water can assist with multiple victims in the water.

What do you love about what they do?

RAY: What I love about what they do is what I love about our department – every day is different. Yesterday, not only did I have you guys at one of my stations, I had a school presentation. Later on I had two minor incidents. We had a lunch meeting with all the heads of the fireside for the refineries, and for the tank farms in this area. And that was my day, besides visiting the other fire stations for mail and discussion of current events. Every day is different.

AN IMPORTANT TOOL

How important is the dive team, with what they do?

RAY: Very important. It would be like you doing some kind of a project but you don't have that specific tool to do that project. If I don't have the dive team, then I'm limited to surface rescue.

We're 24/7. You can get other dive teams to dive in our Harbor, but you'll get them an hour and a half, two hours later. Now, if that's my family or me in the water, I don't want to wait that long.

That's because they're pulling them from all over the City.

RAY: Exactly. And that's the big difference. That's our selling point. But to answer your question, if I have an issue in the water, and my issue is in the water, I can't just say, "Hey, well, you guys are good swimmers. Go ahead and jump in and just deal with it in the surface." So, to answer your question, having a professional dive team is very important.

WORST-CASE SCENARIO

Describe briefly what you see as the worst-case scenario down here. What would be the nightmare that you never want to have to experience?

RAY: The nightmare that we have had is passenger ship

- continued page 11

INTO THE DEEP

LAFD Dive/Rescue Team

THE ALIVE! INTERVIEW

- continued from page 10

fires, some kind of an explosion that brings people into the water. I look at all the components: You have a possible fire, or a confirmed fire. You have a USAR component - Urban Search and Rescue - where you have some kind of structural collapse on the ship. You have injured persons on board whom you have to treat and transport. You have injured persons in the water who you have to get out. And then you have an evacuation issue, not even to mention the HAZMAT issue with fuel and other debris that are going to go into the water. That's most of the elements that we deal with, if you think about it: fire, HAZMAT, search and rescue, multi-casualty incident, and then an evacuation. And the only thing that's missing is a brush fire.



Club CEO John Hawkins and Battalion Chief Ray Gomez aboard Fire Boat 3 at Fire Station 49.

GOOD PEOPLE, GOOD JOB

Talk about the quality of your crew.

RAY: They're all from good stock. They're all firefighters. We've all been to the same training. So I can assure you we're all motivated to help people and to perform to the best of our ability.

And then the other part - they want to get into the water and do the stuff that I'm comfortable doing only on land, in a structure - they want to go do it in the water. They're good people. I'm not a water person. Get me on land, get me on a hill any day. But on the water, I'm glad I have them to do it.

You like your job.

RAY: I love it. My wife says I'm sick because if I'm off for four days, I can't wait to come back to work. I'm 54 and guys keep asking me, "Well, when are you going to retire?" Soon, but probably not anytime soon.

Very good. Thanks for your time!

RAY: You're welcome. ■

At-Sea Rescue



The "Victim"

In this small demonstration, the dive/rescue team displays how it rescues a man overboard (here, an LAFD firefighter plays the "victim." Often, victims are placed on a Miller floating backboard for transport to a waiting rescue boat or vehicle.



The victim is "rescued."



LEFT: Sr. Divers from Fire Boat 5, from left: Gil Garcia and John Torres.

RIGHT: Fire Boat 3 Diver Chris Curtis gives the "okay" signal after splashing.



The Club thanks the LAFD dive/rescue team, especially Firefighter/Paramedic Steve Meiche, for making this story possible.

For more information, to go: www.lafddive.blogspot.com