

Rescue: Senkowski downplays his heroic swim

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"I was just amazed. There were these waves and wind and he just dove in the water and swam across."

The U.S. Coast Guard was also amazed. Last October they presented Senkowski with its Public Service Commendation Award in a ceremony in Miami. It was also the first time the Gales could thank their rescuer in person.

"He put his life on the line and in my mind what he did was a very selfless act," said Brian. "He sort of personifies what we like to call 'a hero.'"

Senkowski, 49, downplays the heroics of his swim. He said in an interview from his home in Courtenay that he is in good shape. Besides, there was nothing else to do.

"I didn't just jump in water just like that. I had some time to think about it so I knew I could do it," said Senkowski. "But it was already planted in my head that it was the only option we had."

The voyage was supposed to be the Gales' dream vacation. With Brian between jobs, Gale had decided to take a six-month leave of absence. The pair left Lake Ontario on their sailboat, heading for Florida and the Caribbean.

At one point they tucked into Nassau to have some repair work on their engine. The repairs obviously were not done properly; after they were back at sea, about 65 kilometres from Miami, the engine started to smoke.

Brian tried to put out the fire and



Gunter Senkowski, second from left, receives the U.S. Coast Guard Public Service Commendation Award in a ceremony in Miami. At right are Pat

and Brian Gale, whom he rescued last April from a Caribbean storm that was threatening them in their sailboat. The other men are unidentified.

broadcast a distress call. But the fumes soon overcame him and he was close to passing out. Afterwards they learned it was carbon monoxide poisoning but at the time, Pat said, she was convinced it was a stroke.

With Brian barely able to stay awake, Pat soon lost control of the sails. When the tall ship Amazing Grace showed up answering the distress call, the sailboat was flopping back and forth, unable to point into the wind and ride out the waves.

Senkowski, who was first mate at the time although he later became captain, said he and the crew tried to send a tow rope across to the stricken sailboat. But Pat didn't have enough strength to pull it on board. That's when Senkowski decid-

ed to swim for it.

Wearing his glasses so he could see and rubber boots so he could walk about, he dove in. Since he would be unable to pull himself aboard the lurching sailboat, he headed for an inflatable dinghy being towed behind.

Once inside the dinghy he then hauled on the rope, pulling himself and the inflatable near the sailboat so he could clamper aboard.

After that he soon had the sailboat under control enough to pull up alongside the Amazing Grace, where Pat and Brian were handed aboard.

The U.S. Coast Guard soon arrived with a helicopter to take Brian to hospital in Miami, showing up again shortly afterward with a cutter to take Pat and their sailboat as well.

The whole rescue was captured on video by one of the passengers aboard the Amazing Grace and aired on a U.S. real-life video show.

Brian said he needs no video. Even though he was close to passing out he will never forget the sight of Senkowski swimming through that storm.

"You have no idea of the kind of peril," said Brian. "These were big seas and you are out in the rain, and this is in the middle of the Gulf Stream so there is a strong current."

"If he hadn't made it across, the next stop would have been Africa."

Hero: Bronze plaque honours deeds on Yarmouth Castle

FROM PAGE B1

he woke up to find the ship filled with smoke and flames.

The fire — that Sinclair-Wise says is now believed to have been deliberately set — ripped through the wooden structure. The bridge and radio shack were engulfed in flame, driving out the captain and crew, and the blazing ship drifted at sea.

With several lifeboats on fire, Sinclair-Wise helped lower the few remaining. He saw the Yarmouth Castle's captain and various crew row away on another lifeboat, and remembers some crew pushing aside passengers to get on board the last few remaining lifeboats.

"That was very disappointing."

Sinclair-Wise tossed mattresses and deck chairs into the water, so the people overboard without life jackets could cling to them. He pulled people through port holes to get them off the burning ship, and helped badly injured people to the lifeboats.

An hour after the fire broke out, the cruise ship Bahama Star pulled up alongside and deployed its lifeboats.

Sinclair-Wise gave up his life-jacket to a father so the man could jump off the burning Yarmouth Castle with his family.

With the Bahama Star's lifeboats approaching, Sinclair-Wise found passengers too frightened to jump off the burning ship. Many of them were elder-

ly. He helped them to the side of the ship, where they jumped off or tried to lower themselves on ropes.

"Many were too frightened to jump. I pushed some off, and they were all picked up by the lifeboats. One lady, about 90 years old, went down the rope all the way, hand over hand."

"She kept saying, 'Am I doing OK?' And I said, 'Just fantastic.'"

As the Bahama Star pulled closer, its captain shouted through a megaphone at Sinclair-Wise.

"He shouted, 'There's no one left to save,' and told me to get off the ship."

Sinclair-Wise shimmied down a rope to a waiting lifeboat, not even wetting his toes.

He says the captain of the Bahama Star, Carl Brown, is his hero. "Without his help, none of us would be here."

Brown, who runs a bed-and-breakfast in Tennessee, and Sinclair-Wise keep in touch. Sinclair-Wise also keeps in contact with several passengers he helped off the Yarmouth Castle.

A large bronze plaque of Sinclair-Wise was also recently made by U.S. sculptor Carrie Boone-Nelson and dedicated in a ceremony aboard USS Intrepid in New York City.

"It was a real honour," he said. "I'm disappointed the Canadian government hasn't done anything to recognize him," said Leila Sinclair-Wise, a Victoria schoolteacher.

CLEVE DHEENSAW

Home & Away in the TC.

Y2K prepares us for Big One

By Louise Dickson
Times Colonist staff

We survived Y2K.

Now we're ready for the Big One.

On Sunday morning, officials at the quiet, almost deserted Provincial Emergency Centre were satisfied British Columbians are better prepared to deal with emergencies than they were in the past.

"The most important message for us is that the individual level of preparedness for all emergencies was enhanced," said Bob Bugslag, deputy director of the Provincial Emergency Program.

"Because of the unknown, people got their emergency preparedness materials together which allows them to respond for 72 hours."

PEP director Merv Harrower agreed. "The citizens of B.C. are better prepared now than they were before this issue," he said. "There's more public awareness."

On New Year's Eve, every chair at the emergency centre was filled with government employees ready to respond to essential services emergencies and to support local governments if they needed help.

"It was kind of interesting because it was building, building, building and within two hours of Y2K, nothing happened," said Harrower.

Only four of the 60 government emergency work-

ers remain at the centre today. The others are on standby, ready to pull resources together if problems arise.

But it seems unlikely. According to Bugslag, no serious incidents related to Y2K occurred anywhere in B.C. or in Canada.

"The only incident we had that we thought might be attributed to Y2K was a lockout procedure at one of the federal penitentiaries on the Lower Mainland," said Bugslag. "We followed it through and it turned out to be a construction problem."

"It's funny that on a normal New Year's Eve there are 30 power outages and we had much less this year. Everything co-operated. The weather was milder around the province."

From Dec. 31 until the morning of Jan. 2, about 200 people called Enquiry B.C.'s telephone information line set up by the provincial government's Y2K office. Enquiry B.C. extended its hours and put on extra staff to answer calls from the public.

"The majority of people have been calling to see if there's anything going on," said Darlene Snider, PEP public information officer. "They were calling to ask how much water they needed or if the banking machines are working."

"But public interest has really dropped off. People are quite happy things are working well in B.C."

Lost hikers found in East Sooke Park

By Louise Dickson
Times Colonist staff

The search for two lost hikers ended happily Sunday morning when RCMP officers on board the Higgitt spotted the pair on the shore of East Sooke Park.

An 18-year-old girl from Quebec and an 18-year-old Ontario man were part of a youth group that set out for a short walk through Anderson Cove about 3:30 p.m. on Saturday. When they failed to return by 6 p.m., a youth group leader called Sooke RCMP. RCMP officers, assisted by Sooke search and rescue volunteers and an RCMP tracking dog, began searching for the lost teenagers.

The Higgitt was sent out to patrol the shoreline and check beaches in the area.

Concern for the inexperienced hikers, who were only wearing shirts and pants, increased as the evening wore on. Temperatures dropped near the freezing mark and rain increased the risk of exposure, said Sooke RCMP Const. Tim Wang.

The rescue party continued searching through the night. At 3 a.m., the Higgitt spotted the lost pair on shore.

The crew tried to rescue the hikers in a small inflatable boat but strong winds, rough water and the park's rugged coastline prevented it from landing.

Officers on board the Higgitt radioed to the foot patrol teams to let them know where the teenagers were. When they found them, the search and rescue volunteers discovered the lost hikers were suffering from mild hypothermia. The teenagers were given warm clothes, brought back to the government dock in Sooke and released into the care of their youth group.

Sooke RCMP Const. Kerry Howse is reminding hikers to plan their walks and carry a map.

"You actually should be dressed properly for the weather conditions," said Howse.

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