



"That mud is like a brown monster that grabs you and holds you," says Riverview firefighter/paramedic Peter Brzezicki, a member of the dive team who struggled through the Petitcodiac River to rescue a stuck dolphin Monday.

HF - RCMP & Fire Dept

# Firefighters train for water rescue

**Riverview dive team an employee initiative that has grown into a unique public service**

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ENHANCING OUR LIVES

This week's dramatic rescue of dolphins trapped in the mud of the Petitcodiac River was made possible thanks to a group of firefighters determined to offer a unique service on a shoestring budget.

"We never thought we'd be rescuing dolphins, but we used the same techniques we would have used if it was people stuck in the mud," Mitch Short, a member of the Riverview Fire Department's dive team, said in an interview yesterday. "When you get into a situation like this, there's not one set plan on how to do it. You've got to keep your mind open. And now we have a plan for getting dolphins out, if it ever happens again."

Peter Brzezicki says it was a safe method, but exhausting. "That mud is like a brown monster that grabs you and holds you. Every step you take, you go up to your knees. The more you move, the more you sink. You have to move slowly and distribute your weight and carefully crawl over it."

Brzezicki spent several hours in the Chocolate River on Monday, crawling his way through the thick mud slowly, pushing the rescue stretcher as he went. When he finally made it to the dolphin, he summoned up his reserve strength and rolled the dolphin onto the stretcher, and then gave the signal for the support crew on shore to reef him in. He held the dolphin tightly as the stretcher skidded across the thick, wet mud. Men on the shore jumped in to pull on the ropes as people clapped and cheered. It's the same technique Brzezicki has used to rescue people from caves and ice.

The techniques, skills and equipment used by the rescue team on Monday were a culmination of more than six years work by members of the Riverview Fire Department, and shine as an example of how employees can use their initiative and determination to develop special projects.

"As a manager, what we do here is offer people the opportunity to go out and learn new skills that will benefit both our organization and the general public," says Riverview Fire Chief Doug Hamer. The Riverview dive team got its

start about six years ago as an initiative of a group of firefighter/paramedics who had a personal interest in recreational Scuba diving. They approached the chief about creating a team that could respond to emergencies in the water.

"Any time you have a surface rescue, you have the possibility of going under water. We wanted to be prepared for everything," Short says. After some investigation, the firefighters discovered there was a great need for the service. While some fire departments along New Brunswick's coastline have boats for rescue, the only ones with dive teams were in Bathurst and Edmunston. The RCMP has a dive team, but it is mainly for recovery of bodies and evidence, with a two-hour response time.

"People can't hold their breath for two hours," Hamer says bluntly.

When the firefighters approached Hamer in 1994, his main concerns were cost to the department and the liability exposure. Everyone agreed it would start slowly, with diving instruction in the pool at the Riverview Aquatic Centre. Hamer agreed to shift \$3,000 a year out of the department's \$2 million budget into the dive team. The money was used to purchase recreational diving equipment, a Zodiac boat and other supplies. It was enough to get started.

"They're doing it because they want to do it," Hamer says. "They wanted to provide a service to the public and we decided to support it."

The firefighters took courses on their own time, learning more about underwater and surface rescue. They also went to Syracuse, N.Y., to learn about black water search and rescue, which is essentially working underwater with zero visibility.

"Because we were firefighters first, we were used to working in the dark with our hands, because if you search a house, there's smoke and it's usually dark," Short says.

The pivotal moment for the dive team came in 1995, when a woman



Firefighter/paramedic Peter Brzezicki and volunteer dive team member Kirk Steeves comfort the dolphins after they are loaded on a truck for transport.

drove her car into the water near the gates of the Petitcodiac causeway. Although the Riverview fire department was only minutes away, the RCMP dive team was summoned. The woman died. Hamer and others were convinced she could have been saved if she had been reached in time. It was time to get serious about the dive team.

Research shows that a person inside a submerged car can survive for 10 to 15 minutes. And people who fall through the ice have been known to survive for 15 to 20 minutes. In either case, a quick response time is crucial.

Hamer started spreading the word that his dive team was available for service not only in Riverview but in the entire area of southeastern New Brunswick.

"In this business, sometimes you train and train and never do it. You need to be able to do something with the skills you have learned. We put a specialty team together and the calls started coming in."

The dive team has responded to a number of calls, including an emergency during the construction of the water treatment plant. They've also been called to perform rescues along the steep cliffs of Albert County. With so many tourists coming to see places like the Hopewell Cape Rocks and the cliffs of Cape Enrage, Hamer believes the need for the service is definitely there.

"We're building the expertise here so we can work with other departments."

They were also called to assist employees of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans whose boat was stuck on the mud. Earlier this summer, members of the dive team rescued a man who had fallen into the Petitcodiac River and got stuck in the mud. They also assisted in the rescue of a young man who had fallen off a cliff into the water at Gibson Falls.

Most members of the dive team are also members of the rope rescue team, who are trained in the use of ropes and rappelling techniques to rescue people either from the water or cliffs. In situations like this, the ropes and the diving equipment are used together.

"A well-organized rescue does not put everything on one card," says Brzezicki.

Since it was formed, the team has grown into a nine-member force, half volunteers and half full-time firefighter/paramedics. They recently took possession of an



Mitch Short with one of the dolphins on a rescue stretcher. Members of the dive team wear Scuba diving dry suits which protect them from the cold and hazardous materials.

used ambulance and are in the process of converting it into a support vehicle. The bright red paint on the van even includes a caricature of a river rat.

The dive team continues to purchase new equipment each year. New equipment includes six of bright orange dry suits which can be used for diving in all weather and protect the diver from hazardous materials. They're also waiting for a new 18-foot boat with a rigid fiberglass body and fire-resistant air-filled pontoons. It should be big enough to carry four fully-equipped divers and a patient.

The next investment might be full-face diving masks which allow the divers to talk to each other and support staff at the surface during an underwater operation.

They also keep a generous supply of snow fence on hand for rescues on the sticky mud of the river. The fencing rolls out like a carpet and allows firefighters to actually walk on the mud without sinking in. It's low-tech but it works.

This week's dolphin rescue gained the dive team a lot of public exposure, but for the dive team it was another chance to practice the skills they have worked on for so long.

"We're in the business of giving people (or dolphins) a second chance," says Brzezicki.

Members of the public who would like to learn more about the dive team and rope team are invited to drop into the Riverview fire station's open house on Saturday, Oct. 13 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.



Peter Brzezicki was totally exhausted after crawling through the thick mud of the Petitcodiac.