

Traffic control a safe port in a storm

Victoria's marine communications centre is the busiest in Canada

BY SANDRA MCCULLOCH, TIMES COLONIST JANUARY 10, 2010



Mark Simpson, officer in charge, MCTS looks at radar images of the Gulf Islands near Active Pass and the Strait of Georgia. The Institute of Ocean Sciences houses the Victoria Marine Traffic Services which coordinates marine vessels in the area
Photograph by: Debra Brash, Times Colonist

A half-dozen men and women wearing headsets face clusters of monitors in a dimly lit room at the Institute of Ocean Sciences at Patricia Bay.

The calm atmosphere belies the importance of the work done here at the Canadian Coast Guard's Victoria Marine Communications & Traffic Services Centre. The mandate is twofold -- respond to calls for help on mariners' VHF radios and act as traffic controllers for larger ships trying to get safely to and from their destinations.

Last year, staff here co-ordinated the movements of more than 150,000 vessels in the straits of Juan de Fuca and Georgia, as well as the Fraser River upstream to New Westminster.

It's the busiest of 22 such centres in Canada and responsible for handling 1,116 marine incidents in 2009. These calls for help range from boats out of gas to people in need of rescue after their boats sank.

From May to July 2009, the centre received 450 calls for assistance.

The staff have a birds-eye view of southcoast waters, with vessels showing up by radar as colour-coded dots. Blue dots shows the vessels the centre is tracking and red dots show the ones not being tracked.

On a visit last week, supervisor Cindy Hayes calls up an image of Georgia Strait during the August long weekend. Hundreds of boats crowd the strait between Vancouver Island and the mainland. They include weekend boaters, fishing boats, deep-sea freighters and giant cruise ships.

One night, Hayes watched as two recreational boaters apparently oblivious to each other headed on what appeared to be a collision course.

She reached one vessel by radio and the skipper changed course, telling Hayes he just didn't see the other boat.

"Those are the kinds of days that stick in my mind," Hayes said.

The job can be more stressful than that of an air-traffic controller, said Hayes, who's done both.

As an air-traffic controller, "you see a situation and you solve it," Hayes said.

"You tell the pilots what they need to do and it's all over. They might be 100 miles apart.

"In this job, you advise the ships' pilots what to do and then they have to make the decision on how they're going to handle it. You don't get to tell them what to do in this job unless it comes down to a very last resort."

Distress calls that come into the Victoria MCTS centre are referred to the Victoria Joint Rescue Centre, located at CFB Esquimalt, which determines which resources should be called upon.

"Our job is communications, theirs is co-ordination," said Mark Simpson, acting officer in charge of Victoria MCTS Centre.

Boats are picked up by radar sites located on Bowen and Mayne islands, Mount Newton and Mount Helmcken. Another site planned for Gabriola is expected to improve monitoring of traffic in the Nanaimo area.

Boaters need to pay attention to the weather and those who don't often call the centre for help. Once fog rolls into Georgia Strait, it's easy to get disoriented, said Simpson.

"If they contact us, we're usually able to locate them by radar," he said. "We can find them by asking them various questions. We make sure they understand where they are and we'll monitor them as they carry on."

Days that stand out for Simpson include Aug. 13, 2002, when the fishing vessel Cap Rouge II capsized off the mouth of the Fraser River. Two people survived while five others, including two children, perished.

There are happier stories, like the MCTS officer who noticed a blip in Georgia Strait that lingered through the night. She asked a tugboat operator heading to the area to check on it. He found and

rescued a 70-year-old fisherman clinging to his overturned aluminum boat.

The officer was given a commendation for her part in saving the man's life.

The job is different every day, said Hayes.

"It's an important job. You really feel like coming to work every day because you know you're making a difference, whether it's helping someone who's in danger or regulating shipping traffic and helping to make things move more smoothly.

"You never know if this is the day you're going to save somebody's life."

smcculloch@tc.canwest.com

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