

Elite police unit patrols watery beat

CHICAGO'S SHORELINE population soars in summer, especially on weekends.

On a not weekend like that just past, the population from the shoreline east into Lake Michigan, grows into the thousands.

In boats of all descriptions—from surfboards with sails to majestic schooners, stubby runabouts to luxurious cabin cruisers—weekend sailors turn the harbors into floating tenements and the lake into aquatic freeways.

And, as in any busy Chicago neighborhood, the Chicago Police Department is there.

The Police Marine Unit, 30 patrolmen and four sergeants, is responsible for the city's deepest district—a dozen feet or less near shore to 100 feet deep five miles out—stretching from Howard Street to the Calumet Harbor.

IT'S THEIR beat from April to November. The rest of the year, most of them work another beat with depth, the mass transit unit.

One marine unit craft handles the Calumet and Chicago rivers, while three work the lake. That's where the action usually is, particularly at times such as last Saturday afternoon, when winds shifted and gusts in from the northwest at up to 34 miles an hour.

Not long thereafter, boats began running aground, particularly against the Monroe Street harbor breakwater.

"We had five calls in an hour after 3 p.m. Saturday," said Len Labiak, crewmember of Marine Boat 2,



Tribune Photo by Arthur Walker

Sgt. Michael Conneely of the Police Marine Unit patrols the aquatic freeways of Lake Michigan.

The beat is popular and elite, featuring fresh air, sunshine—and heart-stopping rescues.

Labiak and Hendren's memory, when two topless women flaunted their violation of the city's dress code. "They made it impossible for us to ignore them," Labiak recalled, smiling. "Pretty soon, we attracted a lot of other boats. When the women put their tops back on, we got booed by a lot of people."

THEIR MOST AMUSING rescue, Labiak recalled, "was a poor kid, about 16, whose parents had hoisted him to the top of their sailboat's 35-foot mast on a pulley that got stuck. He'd been up there a couple of hours, afraid to jump, when we got another pulley line up to rescue him."

Sgt. Zickenheiner and Sgt. James O'Boyle, commander of the marine unit, participated seven years ago in what they and their peers recall as the unit's toughest mission.

"There were nine teen-agers on a sailboat, owned by a doctor," Zickenheiner said. "They went out on a real bad windy spring day, just after graduation."

"They started at Monroe Street harbor and by the time they got to Meigs Field, the doctor's son, the only one who knew anything about sailing, had been washed over the side and drowned."

Zickenheiner recalled being tied to the railing of the police ship, trying to throw a securing rope to the sailboat "while huge waves washed over the boat and came over me like a waterfall."

O'BOYLE REMEMBERED, "We used a half-dozen ropes before we got their boat tied to ours. Every time we'd get them a rope, the waves would toss and pull the boats apart and snap the lines."

"They got all the way to Jackson Park harbor before we rescued them. The kids had tied themselves to the mast of their boat."

The police marine unit was formed in 1960 to take over lake duties of park district patrols. O'Boyle and Zickenheiner are two-decade veterans of the unit. It is a popular and elite task force group. Prior to beginning duty in April of each year, all members undergo a two-week refresher course in swimming, life-saving, and boat handling and maintenance.

Normally, the unit operates six boats. This year, two old boats are out of service, hopefully to be replaced with new units next season.

SUCCESSING THE Zickenheiner-Labiak-Hendren shift on Boat 2 Sunday were Sgt. Mike Conneely and officers Ed Pluckinski and Paul Zia.

Within minutes after their predecessors told them how quiet it was on their shift, Conneely got a call from a boat with engine problems near Navy Pier.

They could not find the boat. "Somebody else probably pulled them in," said Pluckinski. However, Conneely quickly spotted another drifting boat.

"We broke our key in the ignition," explained Daniel Czoski, behind the wheel.

Pluckinski and Zia threw a tow-rope to the boat and secured it to a towing stanchion on the patrol boat stern and Conneely began the trip to Burnham Harbor, where Czoski and his three friends had begun their day.

"ONE OF THE NICE aspects of this duty is that we're perceived more as a service to boaters than a law enforcement body," said Conneely.

He transferred into the unit two years ago from the detective division.

Of the six men on the two duty shifts Sunday, only Hendren owns a pleasure boat, which he described as a small rowboat for fishing.

"It's too expensive," said Pluckinski.

"I go out on friends' boats sometimes," said Zickenheiner. "But being in this unit and having a pleasure boat would be like driving a bus every day, then driving another bus on your day off."

As Conneely towed the disabled boat back to Burnham, where his crew would make a safety check for such things as life-jackets, registration, fire extinguisher, and horn, the radio on Boat 2 crackled with reports of a disabled powerboat and a sailboat in trouble one-half mile out from Navy Pier. A Coast Guard unit indicated it would get the sailboat as Conneely said he'd come back for the other vessel.

"IT'S GETTING toward the end of the weekend, when people are heading back in and finding they're out of gas or some other problem," he said with a smile. "This is more like normal."

In a left-handed compliment, one of the men in the boat being towed asked, "Do you take Visa?" "The service," Zia replied, is free-of-charge."



Close-up

With Michael Hirsley

the 42-foot flagship of the police unit. "You can go for days without serious trouble calls then, bingo, you get a squall and boats are disabled and aground all over the place."

IN ADDITION TO boats aground and disabled, Labiak and mates Dan Hendren and Sgt. Horst Zickenheiner extinguished a boat fire after its skipper ignited an ill-fated barbecue.

The biggest emergency last weekend was handled cooperatively by police and Coast Guard units and Fire Department divers, who pulled two men from Jackson Park harbor waters 10 minutes after they submerged.

Contrary to common perception, rescuers were able to restore both victims' breathing despite their being underwater for 10 minutes: South Siders Jonathan Wright, 26, who went under while swimming; and David Hartsfield, 36, who dove in to try to help and submerged; were in University of Chicago Hospitals intensive care unit. Wright remained in serious condition Tuesday, and Hartsfield in critical condition.

Sunday morning and afternoon were quieter for the marine unit.

BOAT 2 TOWED three disabled boats to shore, and shagged swimmers out of boat traffic areas and boaters out of buoy-designated swimming areas.

As they cruised the harbors, Labiak, Hendren, and Zickenheiner waved and chatted amiably with pleasure craft occupants.

"Waving is one of the real hazards of our beat," Labiak quipped. "You'll pass one of those big tour boats, for example and wave to someone who's waving to you in the front. You both stop waving, then somebody in the middle who saw you wave starts waving and so forth. Pretty soon, you feel like you're waving to everybody individually on the boat."

The passing procession of pleasure craft presents a promenade of pulchritude enough to distract a policeman from his appointed priorities.

That benefit became an embarrassment only once in