

Tightly-organized TOWARF ready for every emergency

By DAVID WHITAKER

"The worst situation we ever had was during a Snipe regatta — I think it was in 1963," Commander Harold Bartman of Town of Oakville Water-Air Rescue Force recalls.

"A sudden blow came up and 13 boats capsized in about 30 seconds. At first some of the sailors didn't want any help because they would be disqualified from the race. The water was bitter cold and we had to do something, so the committee boat finally called off the race.

"We got a lot of help and, fortunately, nobody was hurt."

Not a typical day for crews of Oakville's volunteer rescue force, but a good example of a service that has been a comfort to local boaters for 21 years.

"Fred Oliver was the founding father of the organization," Bartman says, reaching further into his memory for a history of the group. "Civic holiday weekend of 1954 we got together to lay the groundwork. We got our first boat — donated by the Lions Club — late in 1955 and we were in the water by the spring of 1956."

Besides Oliver and Bartman, founders of TOWARF were Bob Johnson and Gord Clark. Their work has led to a tightly organized operation that can launch a massive search or rescue mission on a moment's notice.

"We have a number of private aircraft we can call on," Bartman says. "Several from here in Oakville,

some from Toronto, Hamilton and even St. Catharines — as well as OPP choppers.

"We also have about nine or ten private boats we can count on for a search," he added. "Part of the application for membership in the Oakville Power Boat Squadron is a question on whether the person would be willing to work with us and we've gotten pretty good response."

Most of the members of TOWARF, surprisingly, are not boat owners; they're just civic-minded people who recognized a need and offered to help fill it.

Current membership stands at 92, including 15 captains and six acting captains. There are also scuba divers and other persons with special skills who volunteer time and talent.

In winter there are regular training sessions to upgrade or maintain rescue and first-aid skills and, as soon as ice conditions permit, crews take to the water for real or simulated missions.

Bartman says TOWARF's season keeps getting longer as boaters continuously push forward the dates they dare the ice — but in some ways the job is getting easier.

"If the early boaters get in trouble we have to get to them fast because the water is so cold," Bartman says. "I will say one thing, though — sailors now are much better trained than they used to be. We have some excellent sailors here in Oakville and they have set up their own training programs. That helps considerably."



Town of Oakville Water-Air Rescue Force Commander Harold Bartman.
Photo by DAVID WHITAKER

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From our files

Adventures in the wool trade

Oakville was an important centre of the wool trade back in the eighteenth-fifties.

The country in the area was excellent for grazing, and as more land was cleared the flocks of sheep increased. Farmers came from many miles away to sell their surplus wool, as prices paid by Oakville buyers were higher because of the availability of shipping facilities.

The four chief buyers were Benjamin Hagaman, John Barclay, Peter MacDougald and Cyrus Moore.

Among them, they handled a total of 20,000 pounds of fleeces per season. According to the census of 1861, three farms in Oakville, belonging to John Terry, George K. Chisholm and his brother John A. Chisholm produced between 120 and 160 pounds of wool each.

People who preferred homespun clothing to the newer kind took their wool to Nancy and Thomas Thomas, two custom weavers from South Wales, who operated spinning-wheels and other equipment at their home on Church Street.

Nancy Thomas was still doing custom work in the eighteen-seventies. In the late sixties, when the price of wool dropped, many farmers stopped raising sheep and turned to dairy farming.