

The Officers, Directors and Members of
US SAILING
are pleased to present the
ARTHUR B. HANSON RESCUE MEDAL
to
JEFF HARRISON
for the rescue as follows:

The conditions that Saturday were extremely rough with wind speeds exceeding 25 knots and gusts up to 45 knots. Ten-foot waves were estimated on Ocean Beach. As the three kite surfers approached the surf line they noticed debris in the water, while standing on their surfboards and being towed by large kites 70 feet in the air. They came upon a man in a small rigid inflatable boat (RIB). The man was Captain Roger Christiansen (San Anselmo, CA), 52, of the 43-foot tugboat Richardson Bay. In an attempt to recover a lost skiff, the tugboat, with its two-man crew, was about a half-mile offshore when it took heavy seas over her bow and proceeded to sink. Christiansen and his mate were forced to abandon ship and enter the frigid waters due to the extreme conditions.

About a quarter-mile outside the surf line, Jeff Spiller noticed Christiansen in the inflatable dinghy with its motor unengaged. The dinghy was being blown towards the beach by the high winds. "My plan was to tail the guy in and possibly offer assistance because he was in for a horrible beating through the surf," said Spiller.

After assuring the kite surfers that he did not require assistance, Christiansen instructed them to find his mate, who he said was in distress. "My first tough decision was to go for the guy in the water and leave the guy in the dinghy to spotters on the beach and highway," said Spiller.

The kite surfers followed the debris line up and down the beach and made their way further out to sea and scanned the horizon for a rescue craft. After about ten minutes they spotted a second man in the life ring waving and yelling for help. As Spiller approached the victim, he remembered a key rescue skill – protect yourself and never rush into an ocean rescue with a distressed swimmer. Spiller noticed that the swimmer was clutching a life ring, which relieved Spiller of the concern that he could be pulled underwater by the victim. The victim was having trouble staying upright in the steep waves, so Spiller looped the life ring over his left arm to stabilize the victim. He consoled the victim and ensured they were going to help him.

Meanwhile, Jeff Harrison and Paolo Frediani, were on the way to intercept an approaching Coast Guard boat that was responding to a call and attracted by the kites. Harrison and Frediani had made it safely to the 85-foot Coast Guard rescue boat, but the vessel was not making its way towards Spiller and the victim. Now Spiller had another difficult decision to make. He took several factors into consideration, including the man's condition, distance to the beach, distance to the rescue vessel, risk of beach landing and personal physical condition. He decided to go for a beach landing.

Spiller kept his left arm looped in the life ring, pushed his board away, and while still flying the kite with his right hand he dragged the man towards the treacherous waves and beach.

“I wouldn't really advise this to anyone,” stated Spiller. “The safe and wise call would be to stay with the man and wait if possible. Waves are powerful and dangerous, especially to the soaking, freezing and recently shipwrecked.” As they approached the outer breaking waves, Spiller noticed the Coast Guard boat making its way down the beach towards them. He made the decision to start dragging the victim back out to sea for an easier boat landing and quicker and less risky rescue attempt. Ten minutes later, Spiller was able to communicate with the Coast Guard and position himself and the victim so they could take a line from a crewman.

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“This isn't that easy or safe while flying a powerful kite, but it was done adequately enough to get around the victim, and the Coast Guard was able to haul him aboard and to safety,” explained Spiller. The 53-year old man was transported to Marin General Hospital where he was treated for mild hypothermia and shock.

“A kite can be very unpredictable, hard to handle and dangerous to the user and anyone they are trying to aid,” Spiller commented. “The lines can easily wrap around vulnerable areas and cause damage. On the other hand, search patterns can be performed with great efficiency when traveling at speeds from 8 to 20 knots. These extreme conditions do not hinder kiter's maneuverability from moving effectively through the water at great speeds.”

Coast Guard Lt. Andrew Kennedy praised Spiller in an interview with the San Francisco Examiner (http://bit.ly/SFexaminer_Burack_041011): “He really, in all honesty, saved his life by keeping him above water until we could get there.”

Tragically, Christensen did not survive the incident. After fire department personnel on shore reported seeing the RIB capsized by a large wave, the Coast Guard conducted an unsuccessful 8½ hour search with three boats and a helicopter over a 44-mile area. Days later his body was recovered near Fort Funston.

Harrison recalled, “One of the more haunting memories of the event for me was coming over the top of a 10-foot swell after kite surfing a wave and seeing Captain Christiansen sitting at the helm of the tug’s RIB in his street clothes – no wetsuit, no life suit, no life vest on, just his street clothes. He was very calm and never showed distress. His last wishes were that we go and help his mate, which we did. I don't think he knew what kind of surf he was about to deal with, which makes me sad.”

US Sailing awarded the Hanson Rescue Medal to kite surfer Jeff Harrison for a rescue made off the coast of San Francisco’s Ocean Beach on April 9, 2011.

Dr. Gino Bottino, MD
Chairman, Safety at Sea Committee
By Direction

NOMINATION

Date 4/20/2011 6:21:40 PM

Date of Incident Saturday, April 09, 2011

What was the nature of this Incident? rescue of part of the crew of a tug boat that sank

What happened? The tug boat Richardson Bay was on a recovery mission of a skiff off of Pacifica, California. As the Tug left the shipping channel a half mile off of Ocean Beach, California heading south, they started taking on water and the Tug sank. One crew member put on a life ring and jump overboard, the skipper put on a pfd and got in the Tugs tender a 14 foot RIB, and the tug sank out from under him.

Event Name Tug Boat Richardson Bay sinks

Sponsoring Yacht Club St. Francis

Event City San Francisco

Event State California

Body of Water Pacific Ocean

Day or Night? Day

Air Temperature 45 degrees F.

Water Temperature 50 degrees F.

Wind Speed 28 knts gusting 38

Wave Height 10 feet @ 10 seconds

Name and Home Town (City, State) Roger Christiansen, San Anselmo, California

Boat Name Richardson Bay

Boat Length 43 feet

Boat Make & Model Tug Boat?

Name and Home Town (City, State) Unknown, Marin, California

Boat Name Richardson Bay

Boat Length (19) 43 feet

Boat Make & Mode Tug Boat?

What position(s) was/were the victim working before they went in? Unknown

Was a PFD worn by the victim(s)? Yes

What Type (Victim 1)? Unknown

What Type (Victim 2)? Life ring?

Skipper's Name Jeff Spiller

Boat Make & Model Randy Cone Kite Board, Slingshot Kite

Crew's Names and function each performed in the rescue: Jeff Spiller: Grabbed victim drug him through the surf to the outside and pushed him up against the coast guard cutter so two men on deck could reach over and hoist him on to the deck.

Boat Length (42) 5'8", 6 meter kite

Skipper's Name (43) Paolo Frediani

Crew's Names and function each performed in the rescue: helped Jeff Spiller keep track of his gear during the rescue so he would be able to get back to the beach without body dragging all the way.

Boat Make & Model Randy Cone kite board and Caution kite

Boat Length 5'8"

What recovery method was used (Quickstop, Reach Method, Figure 8, etc)? Grab and go!!!

Did the victim's boat lose sight of the victim? Yes

What search pattern was used? None the boat sank

Was GPS or other electronic MOB function used to track or help locate the victim? No

Was a rescue swimmer put in the water Y/N? No

Did the victim have a strobe light, a light or whistle? None noted
What color clothes were visible above the water? looked black
Was the victim able to help in the recovery? No
How did the victim get hoisted from the water level up onto the deck? Jeff Spiller pushed him up against the coast guard cutter so that the coast guard could reach over and hoist him by hand on to the deck.
Was any injury sustained by the victim? Yes
Was a Lifesling aboard? Yes
What type (hypothermia included)? hypothermia
Was it used? No
How much time did the victim spend in the water? about a half hour
Did a Mayday call go out? yes
Who responded? Coast Guard, Beach Patrol, Fire Dept.
Nominators Name Jeff Harrison
Do you give permission to have this story published? No
Can you provide copies of articles published about this event Y/N? Yes