



Maritime Search and Rescue's Susan Pickrell

With a distinguished career in maritime search and rescue, Susan Pickrell continues to work to save lives on the water

REGIONAL SUPERVISOR OF Maritime Search and Rescue, Susan Pickrell, stops in the Joint Rescue Coordination room to probe how a search near Prince Rupert is progressing. The maritime coordinator, John Millman, is monitoring a chart west of Digby Island, a chart with moving arrows indicating current patterns and wind speed. He's tracking the possible drift pattern of a man who tumbled out of a 14-foot craft the previous afternoon. With the click of a mouse, a line of his likely trajectory flashes onto the screen. "That's how we establish a search area and attempt a rescue," says Susan. "But

it's dicey. He apparently wasn't wearing a PFD, the water temperature is nine degrees and estimated survival time is less than three hours. It's a huge area and his fall overboard was only reported 12 hours after it happened."

Susan, whose work in SAR has spanned two decades, didn't grow up near salt water, but her uncle, a merchant mariner, inspired the Saskatoon-raised sailor. "I loved hearing about his life on the ships," she tells me over coffee. "And I learned sailing on the lake where we spent our summers." Against her uncle's advice, she enrolled at the Canadian Coast Guard College in Cape

Breton and earned a Bachelor of Nautical Sciences. "It was a great education, a full scholarship and a guaranteed job," Susan says enthusiastically. "I chose to go west and started as a third mate—watchkeeping—aboard the buoy-laying *Sir James Douglas*."

Susan, who's lithe, walks fast and buzzes with energy, had been told that Coast Guard crews hated cadets and women. Instead, she found she had "27 big brothers. They were great. I was raised to believe I was equal, so if they picked up a 90-pound bag of something, so did I. Never had a problem."

She continued up the career ladder, ▶

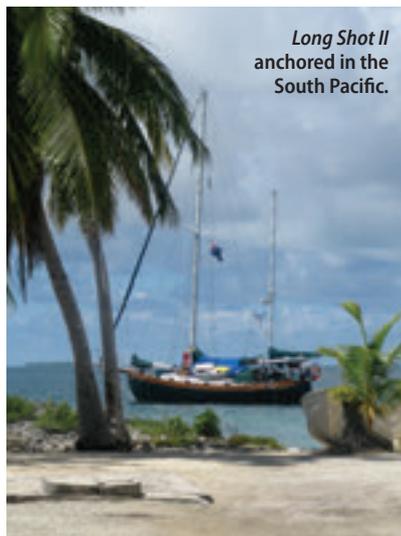


Saylor, Charlie and Riley celebrate their catch.

passing her exams to rise to chief mate and by age 27, she'd earned her master's ticket "home trade, unlimited tonnage, 200-mile offshore." She skippered the cutter *Kitimat II*, a northern BCSAR vessel working out of Prince Rupert. She liked everything about the job. "You have constant connections with people in the local and marine community. You work with lighthouse keepers. And you must make life-and-death decisions. It's both challenging and satisfying. I guess I'm an adrenaline junkie. I inherited it from my dad, a police officer."

In 1996 Susan joined the Sea Island Hovercraft Base in Richmond and commanded several hovercrafts. Her last, the *Penac*, was a 25.4-metre hovercraft capable of travelling at 45 knots. "I drove it daily," she continues. "It's an amazing vehicle that skims over the water but needs solid skill to operate, especially at night." She spent 14 years operating hovercrafts, 10 of them as captain after her promotion to that rank.

In 2010 Susan was awarded the Governor General's Coast Guard Exem-



Long Shot II anchored in the South Pacific.

plary Service Medal. A year later, she received a CCG Distinction award and a 911 Award for a dramatic rescue during the notorious 2010 Strait of Georgia Good Friday storm. Another promotion to Supervisor Marine SAR brought her and her family to Victoria's Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in 2010.

An Offshore Jaunt In 2012, Susan and her husband Doug Pickrell took a self-funded sabbatical and sailed to New Zealand and back. Their children, Charlie, 13, Riley, 11, and daughter Saylor, six, joined them on their 13.1-metre, Taiwanese-built Hans Christian ketch, *Long Shot II*. The yacht, a hurricane casualty, had been written off, but Doug, a marine electrician, patched the fibreglass holes, rewired, replumbed and made the boat seaworthy and liveable. "He can repair anything," Susan says proudly. "It took five-and-a-half years with *Long Shot II* on the hard in Steveston. When we arrived in South Pacific harbours and anchorages, everyone was usually overhauling something on their boat. We rarely had to."

The Pickrells had signed the children up for correspondence schooling, but found the curriculum inflexible. "We wanted the kids to appreciate their immediate environment. The way the local population lived. The diversity. They played with kids ashore and learned from other yachties. Language was no ▶

barrier. I believe those 14 months taught them perseverance, to understand hardship. They helped on the boat and gained confidence. Charlie climbed the mast when we were entering a reef-strewn passage late in the day and directed us around danger. He also became a competent fisherman. Riley missed hockey, turned to reading and after returning home, became national track-cycling champion in his age group. Both boys are participating in the sea cadets."

The offshore voyage was so terrific Su-

san would go again "in a heartbeat." True to form, they even affected a rescue by towing a sailboat with a defective engine for 250-miles until the yacht had enough wind to sail (see PY January 2013). The family was committed to leaving the places they visited a bit better than they found them and accomplished that goal through Doug's repair skills. "On one island, he mended four sewing machines. That's huge for the women who help support their families by sewing. He made four-wheel drives operational

again. He fixed a concrete mixer. On just about every island, he refurbished something."

Returning to SAR Duties The Victoria headquarters, located at the CFB Esquimalt, covers all 600 miles of the B.C. coast. It works closely with Vessel Traffic Services, the Comox and Prince Rupert stations and with the Seattle- and Juneau-based U.S. Coast Guard to help save lives. "All our Coast Guard ships are multi-taskable," says Susan. "So they can serve in any capacity. We have 10 lifeboat stations and can call on aircraft. I really like knowing what and where all our resources are and how to deploy them best."

She's proud of the work that SAR coordinators perform. When two Canadians in an American-registered sailboat sank off Costa Rica, they activated a Canadian-registered Epirb and the Victoria SAR was notified. Costa Rica lacked the resources to find the people afloat in a dinghy, but the coordinators directed the U.S. Coast Guard who flew over the tiny vessel. "We were then able to locate ships in the area and one saved the persons who'd been shipwrecked. So it was through their honed skills our coordinators saved the day."

Susan tells me about another family of five fishing in a nine-metre powerboat off Tofino. "The boat had turned turtle when a rogue wave smashed into her. They'd been able to climb into the liferaft and luckily, the dad had just bought an Epirb with a built-in GPS. We knew exactly where they were and got them in 30 minutes." The man who went overboard near Prince Rupert without any safety gear was never found.

Of the 3,500 calls SAR gets annually, about 600 are life threatening. "I did an analysis of fatalities," says Susan. "To determine what might have saved them. The most common answer is *early*, even *instant* notification to SAR. Life jackets are essential, of course, but if we don't know where you are... Sometimes there's no time to make a VHF call. So I recommend that people wear a Personal Locator Beacon with a GPS at all times. It's a great technology that can substantially increase your chances to survive. PLBs are small and not that expensive. And they work on land too when you go for that hike. *Let me emphasize*—take the 'search' out of search-and-rescue so we can save you."

And that's Susan's take-away message. @



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