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Life Safer's Personal Retriever Wins Award, Saves Lives

Friday, January 21, 2005

By Jim Kelly

Before he commanded the Coast Guard Cutter Point Stuart, and before he was an award-winning inventor, Paul Driscoll was a little boy drowning in a pool.

"I was doing the classic arm pump," he revealed in a recent interview with The Log. "Both of my hands were splashing at my sides, and my feet were pointing down in the ballerina position we find associated with many drown victims.

"Then a pair of hands grabbed me and pulled me to the side."

Driscoll paused to take a drink of coffee. His boxer's nose gave excellent contrast to the tenderness in his eyes. "When I stopped shaking," he continued, "I looked around to thank the person who had saved me ... but there was no one there."

This experience created a life long obsession for Driscoll, to provide aid for as many people as possible who found themselves in his situation. At 17 years of age, he escaped the rough neighborhoods of south Boston where he grew up and enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard.

Throughout a distinguished 28-year career, Driscoll, who is somewhat saltier than a can of Campbell's soup, rose to the distinguished rank of master chief and became the captain of his own ship.

As Driscoll approached retirement, his need to help others focused on a glaring inadequacy in traditional water rescue, the difficulty of getting a life line and buoyancy to people who were in the water and in need of help. In 1996, after he left the Coast Guard, Driscoll began devoting his full time to working on a device that would deliver buoyancy and reach to drowning victims.

He formed a company he named "Life Safer" and adapted the basic flight design of a Frisbee to accommodate a light, strong life line.



HEAVE TO - In the foreground, Paul Driscoll prepares to deliver a life-saving toss of his Personal Retriever, while Stuart Hartley watches his successful heave of the new device. Life Safer's new product is a hybrid between a life ring and a heaving line and is now receiving approval from important agencies such as fire and police departments as well as others in the rescue services.

Photo by: Jim Kelly



A WINNER - Paul Driscoll, inventor of Life Safer's Personal Retriever device (on the wall above his left shoulder), shows his Most Innovative New Product Awards trophy from the MIP luncheon on Dec. 2. Driscoll won in the field of

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- Capt. Alan Hugenot
- Tom Gatch



In 2001, after working with three different mechanical engineers over a period of four years, the first working prototype of the Personal Retriever came out of the workshop. With a buoyancy factor of 12 pounds and a reach of up to 100 feet, the Frisbee-like device was easily thrown by anyone after a few minutes of instruction.

General Technology.

Photo by: Jim Kelly

It seemed like the perfect answer to an age-old problem. Unfortunately, there was another age-old problem: getting approval from the Coast Guard.

To this time, the Coast Guard approves only two types of throwable rescue devices: the life ring and buoyant seat cushions. "The Coast Guard stopped using the life ring on their ships 20 years ago," Driscoll explained.

"If you're in water and need help, you don't want someone throwing a 7-pound bag of potatoes at your head."

Driscoll dismissed the effectiveness of the seat cushion with a single question: "Have you ever tried to throw a seat cushion against the wind?" he asked.

In spite of their shortcomings, either the life ring or seat cushions are required on all small boats. "The irony is, neither Coast Guard ships nor any other professional mariners use either of these devices," Driscoll said.

"They know they don't work." Driscoll went on to explain the life ring is carried on most Coast Guard vessels but is only used as a marker when someone is in the water.

Driscoll explained this irony by saying the laws governing Coast Guard approval are antiquated and enforced by some people "... who don't know what the pointy end of a boat is called."

What Coast Guard ships typically rely on are two unapproved devices: the line bag and the heaving line (a rope with a rubber ball on the end).

Both the line bag (what many rescuers call the "drowning-acceleration tool") and the heaving line have the same problems. They only have an effective reach of 40 to 50 feet, and they don't float."

Production began on the Personal Retriever, but, by the end of 2003, sales were still slow. Without Coast Guard sanction, boat owners were limited to life rings and seat cushions as approved devices on their vessels.

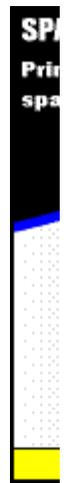
The irony was 50 Coast Guard ships were already using the Personal Retriever and enthusiastically endorsing it. The device was also found to be as effective in rivers as it was on the ocean. In the winter of 2003, a New England fire crew used the Personal Retriever to rescue five people who had fallen through the ice.

In a television interview, the firefighters said they could not have affected the rescue without the new device.

But, Driscoll's struggle was just beginning. Professionals in the boating industry and in government refused to believe any product could be so good. As good as he was as an inventor, Driscoll fell short in the salesman game.

It was time to take his show on the road.

Driscoll and his small band of believers, including partners Larry Nance and former Coast Guard helicopter pilot Stuart Hartley, started the Personal Retriever Challenge. In the past four years, they have approached everyone from New England fire departments to the Japanese commercial fishing fleet and have dared them to bring out their best life-saving devices to compete against the Personal Retriever.



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One by one, the competition failed - and those who initially opposed it became supporters of the new device. Today, the Personal Retriever endorsement list reads like a who's who of the rescue world.

It includes the New England Association of Fire Chiefs, the American Fire Equipment Company, Boston Pilots Association, Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary, the Maritime Institute, Navy Port of Operations, the Marine Corps, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Sportfishing Association, the San Diego Fire Department, and numerous towns, fire departments, and police departments across the country.

Undaunted by shrinking finances and encouraged by its success, Driscoll continues to perfect his bright-yellow disk that looks sort of like a Frisbee. He put in an insert for the fingers to help throw it and developed a professional model with a survival light and an EPIRB in it.

He has also continued to work on other life-saving products. In addition to some of his newer inventions (he declined to discuss any until they receive patents), he has been helping others who are having trouble getting Coast Guard approval.

"We're working with an inventor who has an emergency flare," he revealed, "that consists of a fan-type laser and can be seen at 20,000 feet."

But, the Personal Retriever is still his main product.

In January of 2004, Driscoll was talking with Nancy Van Dillen from UCSD Direct about possible financial help to keep the Personal Retriever in production when she suggested he submit the invention as a contestant in the prestigious Most Innovative New Product Awards (MIP). For 17 years, the MIP has been given to companies in San Diego who show excellence in technological innovation.

Knowing he was a long shot, Driscoll submitted his application to the committee and promptly forgot about it. However, in late fall, he received an invitation to attend the MIP awards luncheon on Dec. 2, as one of 19 finalists.

"I was surprised and thrilled to be invited, but I knew there was no chance of winning the award," Driscoll said. As he was driving his truck into the parking lot of the posh event, Driscoll noticed most of the cars driving in were Mercedes and BMW's.

"I really knew I was out of my league then," he explained. "All the other finalists seemed to be members of multi-million-dollar corporations."

At the luncheon, the attendees were applauded for their inventions, and winning awards were given in six categories: Hardware, Software, Biotechnology, Life Sciences, Telecom, and General Technology. The Personal Retriever was one of three finalists in the last category.

When the winners were announced, Driscoll was astounded to hear his name called. Without a prepared speech and wiping salad dressing from his mouth, he walked to the podium to receive his award.

Perhaps for the first time in his life, the salty master chief was stunned into silence, but he soon recovered and said, returning to perfect character, "In this field of competition, I feel like the last fire hydrant in a canine universe."

For more information on Life Safer's Personal Retriever, call (888) 222-0373, (619) 222-3467 or visit www.life-safer.com.

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Retriever Product Specifications

Reach: 100 feet
 Buoyancy: 12 pounds*
 Deployment time: 10 seconds or less
 Re-deployment time: 45 seconds or less
 Material: soft expanded polyethylene foam top and
 propylene base
 Diameter: 17 inches
 Weight: 1.5 pounds
 Training time: one hour or less
 Rope: 650-pound test buoyant 3/16-inch
 polypropylene
 Design: aero-dynamic and hydro-dynamic rotating
 wing
 Wind penetration: full extension into 15-knot winds
 Coating: petroleum-resistant Plasti-Coat

* The U.S. & UK accept 50 Newton / 11 pounds of
 buoyancy now required in the Type 50 Buoyancy
 Aids as sufficient to keep a conscious person afloat.

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