

KEVO'S BOATING TIPS & MORE

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PICYA Wheelchair Regatta

Starting last month my column was renamed “Kevo’s Boating Tips and More.” This change is intended to expand the scope of the column to include other subjects in addition to boating tips. I’ll still be focusing on boating skills, seamanship and safety, but there will be times when I’ll write on charitable events and other worthwhile subjects.

Last month I wrote about the value of considering joining a yacht/boat club. I wrote about the Pacific Inter-Club Yacht Association (PICYA) and what a terrific resource they are for information on Northern California yacht/boat clubs. So what the heck else does PICYA do?

To find out I hitched a ride on Vern and Linda Bendsen’s yacht, *Ko Olina*. (*Ko Olina* means “fulfillment of joy” in traditional Hawaiian language.) Vern is the junior staff commodore of PICYA. The event was called the Wheelchair Regatta and took place at the Encinal Yacht Club in Alameda.

The Wheelchair Regatta is the brainchild of one Ms. Margot Brown. She started it nine years ago and it has become the signature charity event for PICYA. The last Saturday in September PICYA invites member clubs to participate in giving sightseeing tours on San Francisco Bay to disabled veterans from various Northern California Veterans Administration homes. Yachts from dozens of member clubs gathered at the Encinal Yacht Club days before the event. The vets were bussed in from as far away as Yountville in the Napa Valley and Palo Alto on the peninsula. The US Coast Guard and Oakland Fire Department also participated.

A Perfect Day on the Bay

The day started with the arrival of the veterans at 10 a.m. It was a beautiful day on the Bay and the vets were eager to get out on the water. As I surveyed the dock, vessels and participants, I recognized many friends I knew from yacht/boat clubs around the Bay and Delta. The Coast Guard and Oakland Fire Department took command of safely boarding those in



The *Ko Olina* embarks on a two-hour tour for the Wheelchair Regatta.



View from the deck at the Encinal Yacht Club.

wheelchairs, the blind and disabled. (It was a very orderly affair.)

One by one the vessels embarked from the club out the Alameda estuary to the Bay. There was very little wind and the temperature was in the high 70s – perfect for a day on the Bay. Each vessel took its own course with the understanding that they would return in approximately two hours. Some vessels accommodated those in wheelchairs, some only the blind. The *Ko Olina* accommodated ambulatory vets; all guests and crew were



Ms. Margot Brown, founder of the Wheelchair Regatta, at Encinal Yacht Club.



The Wheelchair Regatta BBQ in full swing.

having a great time. My two crewmates were Ray Tsuneyoshi, Director of the California Department of Boating and Waterways, and Bob Dubois, Past Commodore of the Benicia Yacht Club. Ray, Linda, Bob and Vern are longtime participants in this event.

After making our way out of the estuary, underneath the Bay Bridge and along the cityfront we headed back to port. One by one the boats returned and I could see the smiles on all the veterans' faces as they disembarked. This was definitely a special day for them. They were treated with respect,



Ray Tsuneyoshi, Director of the California Department of Boating and Waterways, and Steve Rienhart, Commodore of the Encinal Yacht Club.

dignity and gratitude for their service to their country.

But the day wasn't over yet. Waiting for the veterans back at the club was a full-blown BBQ complete with a band. Some danced to the music while in line for lunch. The club had picnic tables set out on the lawn with a beautiful view of the estuary and a big dose of fresh air and sunshine for everyone.

Appreciation for All Participants

I met Margot Brown and thanked her for the invitation to participate and write about this very worthwhile event. The vets started leaving around 4 p.m. and after saying my goodbyes, I headed home to ponder how to approach writing about my experience at this event. Vern told me a story that summed it all up for me... One year Vern was participating in the Wheelchair Regatta and while cruising out on the Bay, one of the vets onboard got all choked up and had tears running down his face. He had been assigned to a "swift boat" during the Vietnam War. Both of his legs were blown off in combat. He'd been in a wheelchair ever since. When asked why he was crying he said, "I never thought I'd ever get to go out on the water again after being so seriously wounded."

Needless to say, PICYA, the Encinal Yacht Club, Oakland Fire Department, USCG and all participating clubs and members are to be commended for their participation and financial contributions in this event. Special thanks go to Ms. Margot Brown, for orchestrating the entire affair. When I thanked her personally for all she has done she replied: "Don't thank me... the real heroes are the vets who served their country and deserve much more than a day on the Bay." (Typical Margot!)

I feel this column speaks for itself in terms of "Kevo's Boating Tips." I plan to return next year (if they'll allow me), and do my best to help make a vet smile if just for a little while. If you or your organization is interested in participating in or supporting this very worthwhile event, please contact Brown at mjbjhb@aol.com or visit www.PICYA.org

As always, feedback is appreciated. You can reach me at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com

Be safe & happy boating! ☞