

Boating Tips

Wheelchair Regatta

The 13th annual Pacific Inter-Club Yacht Association (PICYA) Wheelchair Regatta was held at the Encinal Yacht Club in Alameda Saturday, Sept. 26. PICYA-affiliated yacht club members came from all over NorCal by boat (and auto) to participate in this event. What they do is transport military service veterans residing in Veterans Administration nursing homes as well as hospitals and private nursing homes in NorCal to the yacht club along with assistants if necessary.

For the first time they had 20 sight-impaired vets with “translators” to describe the scenery to them. They are welcomed aboard dozens of participants’ vessels for a two-hour boat ride around the Bay. When they arrive back at the club, they have a full-blown barbecue waiting for them complete with a band.

Approximately 100 of the vets

were in wheelchairs and many more were using walkers. Let me tell you, it’s not easy lifting someone up off the dock in a wheelchair and planting them safely on a boat and vice versa. Special thanks to Oakland Fire Department and United States Coast Guard (USCG) for helping with the heavy lifting.

I’d participated twice and even did a column on this event in the past, but nothing could prepare me for the experience this year...

I have a Pacific Powerboating client, who is paralyzed from the waist down, by the name of Rich. He actually has a boat retrofitted for his special needs and has started a company named “Rollin’ on the



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

River” with the goal of consulting and retrofitting vessels for disabled persons. He will have a website soon that will provide further information.

During the course of instructing him how to handle his boat, I told him about the Wheelchair Regatta. He just had to go. Good for him! I agreed to accompany him and navigate his vessel and crew from Willow Berm Marina in the Delta to the Encinal Yacht Club in Alameda on Friday, help coordinate the loading and unloading of passengers, assure safety and finally guide her safely back to the Delta.

Retrofitting The Boat

Rich’s vessel is a 1985 51-foot Bluewater. First they (Delta Boat Works) had to tear out the side door



A disabled vet is being hoisted up to the bridge.

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and enlarge it to accommodate a ramp and a wheelchair. Then they installed an elevator system to lower Rich to the deck after coming up the ramp under his own power from the dock.

Next, another ramp was installed that leads down to the galley and master stateroom. After that the hallway to the master stateroom had to be torn out and enlarged to accommodate a wheelchair.

Now the \$64,000 question: How to engineer a (davit) system to winch Rich up from the main deck to the bridge. This was accomplished by mounting what appears to be a wakeboard tower on steroids and a winch system across the entire beam of the boat. Then they cut a hatch-



Our host, Rod Pimentel, Commodore of the Encinal Yacht Club.

way right on top of the floor area in the master stateroom big enough to accommodate a wheelchair going straight up through it.

After he is up and the wheelchair clears of the bridge deck, he swings himself to port and lands himself with a portable davit control switch. Rich designed the system himself. Bravo!

We arrived after a six-hour journey and were greeted with a col-

lective: "I'll be damned" from participants watching Rich descend from the bridge through the hatch. After a great "skipper's" dinner Friday and continental breakfast Saturday morning, we began loading our honored guests. While most vessels involved could accommodate one or two wheelchairs, with considerable manpower from the fire department and USCG we were able to fit six on the bridge with a great view!

And so our tour began with about 18 guests total. (And yes, we had life jackets for all!) We went out the Estuary, under the SF Bay Bridge, along the waterfront and into McCovey Cove just as a ball game was starting at AT&T Park. The vets loved seeing that!

Along the way we went over a huge wake that made the whole boat shudder. An old man in a wheelchair gestured for me to come over. He asked: What did we hit back there? HA! Upon our return we were informed that the last group of wheelchair-bound vets had been waiting patiently to tour the Bay. Rich insisted we take another tour with six more wheelchair-bound vets. What a guy!!!

The tour ended and we all settled in for a relaxing hour or so after the festivities ended. I have to tell you, I've never been so "moved" by an event as I was with this one.



Lt. Dan's crew.

Kevo's Tip:

During this holiday season it is important to realize that many folks are less fortunate than ourselves.



EYC Port Captain Vic Early did a fine job directing traffic.

There are no tangible rewards for doing charity work. It is a reward you only perceive and appreciate after the good deed is done. This year was the largest turnout of vets they ever had.

If you own a boat and belong to a PICYA-affiliated yacht club, you may want to consider getting involved in this event. For more

information on how you and/or your club can participate in this very worthwhile event, contact Margo Brown at mjbjhb@aol.com or visit www.picya.org.

Be safe & happy boating!

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ☞

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