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My View: Routine dive turned into dramatic rescue at sea

My View

On Sunday morning, March 15, I was aboard the cabin cruiser Donna III out of Beverly with a group of divers from the North Shore Frogmen.

It was an outing during which they planned to explore some shipwrecks in the waters off Cape Ann. My intent was to take some background video footage for an upcoming documentary.

As we left Beverly Harbor, the weather was calm and warm for that time of year (although the water temperature was slightly above freezing at 37 degrees). It looked like it would be a rather uneventful trip.

The first dive was at the site of the Chester Poling, which went down in a storm in 1977 — the year before the epic Blizzard of 1978. Everything proceeded normally and we headed off for the next dive site.

At Graves Island, off the coast of Manchester, the wreck of the pre-Civil War era ship, USS New Hampshire (renamed the Granite State), sits in about 40 feet of water at the base of the rocks. Eventually six divers went down with the intention of exploring and perhaps bringing back a copper spike, nail, or some other artifact from the wreckage.

I stayed on deck chatting with Doug Currier, the captain of the vessel, and Daryl Findlay, a diver who had stayed on board.

After a while we heard shouting and saw that a couple of divers were clinging to the rocks about 100 yards away. One of them seemed to be struggling and in distress. He turned out to be Norman "Dugie" Russell, a

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seasoned diver and the oldest member of the group. The other man was Dave Cunningham, a diving instructor, who was assisting Russell, having helped him take off his tanks and gear to lessen his weight. They were in a precarious situation, using up a lot of energy being pounded and tossed about along the slippery, jagged rocks by the swelling waves.

Captain Currier quickly assessed the situation and immediately sprung into action, barking out instructions from the cockpit over the boat's intercom. He began maneuvering the stern of the boat toward the rocks to retrieve the stranded pair. He had to be extra careful because, at the same time, he had to coordinate picking up the other divers who had begun surfacing, some of whom were not fully aware of the problem one of their partners was experiencing.

As Russell tried to swim over to the boat from the rocks, we could see he was exhausted and moving with difficulty. Todd Randall, the Frogmen Club's president, had just come up out of the water. He dove back in to help get the struggling Russell over to the boat. Eventually, and with a little difficulty, Findlay managed to pull Russell onto the deck. I could now see his condition at close hand. He was not moving and had an agonized look on his face, which was drained of color. His breathing was very shallow, he could barely talk and was beginning to shake from the effects of the icy water.

As the rest of the divers were being picked up out of the water, Russell was carried into the cabin. By this time he had begun to shiver uncontrollably.

Quick action was vital.

His diving suit was removed; he was wrapped in warm clothes and blankets; and oxygen was administered.

Cunningham, who was now back on board, coordinated the efforts of the other divers, including Dan Hering, Jess Leslie and Jack Munro, all of whom assisted during these crucial moments.

They spoke calmly and reassuringly to Russell. Working together, they made sure everything possible was being done for him.

Meanwhile, Randall called to shore for an ambulance to meet us at the wharf. By this time Currier was racing the boat back to Beverly Harbor and we arrived a short time later.

After we tied off at the pier, the EMT crew came aboard and took over ministering to the stricken Russell. They stabilized him, got him onto a stretcher, off the boat, and into the ambulance. The hospital report we saw later indicated that he had suffered from overexertion, stress, hypothermia and panic.

The important thing is, he made it through the incident.

I am convinced that had it not been for the quick thinking and selfless response of the crew and all the North Shore Frogmen aboard the boat that day, Dugie Russell would not have survived the ordeal. Their courage and heroic actions saved his life.

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Walt Kosmowski is a resident of Beverly.