

# Vancouver Police Department Marine Squad

Simon Hill photo



With limited police resources and an enormous patrol area, enforcing the law on Vancouver's waters can be a lonely business indeed.

BY TIM LYNCH

For close to a hundred years the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) has provided the only dedicated marine policing service in the BC Lower Mainland. With 100 miles of shoreline that includes the busiest port in Canada, industrial waterfront businesses, private and public marinas and parklands, VPD's marine squad has developed its own tradition, culture and discipline in serving all waterfront users.

Sergeant Neil Gillespie leads the VPD's Marine Squad. A twenty-one year veteran with the VPD, he has been given responsibility for the management and planning of VPD marine services. Neil oversees a team of 14 constables and one corporal who patrol the city's waterways year-round. Four officers are dedicated full-time to marine patrolling, with their colleagues demonstrating amphibian capabilities in patrolling dockside and as well as on the water.

The team is equipped with a 30-foot custom-built aluminum patrol boat and a rigid-hull inflatable. The patrol boat, **R.G. McBeath**, (1994, Daigle Welding & Marine) is named after a Vancouver police officer and First World War Victoria Cross veteran who was fatally shot while arresting an impaired driver on October 10, 1922 in the City's downtown core, just one year after joining the VPD.

## A Unique Beat

The waterfront poses unique policing challenges on several levels. "The waterways are federal jurisdiction," Sergeant Gillespie explains, "therefore the conventional City bylaw administration does not apply. Federal legislation around Boating Regulations and Restrictions apply. Most of our work involves enforcement of the Canadian Criminal Code by investigating marine criminal activity along with implementing crime prevention programs. We are actively involved in the enforcement of safety regulations and the saving of lives. We work closely with the Port Authority. All too frequently we are required to recover bodies of persons who end up in the waterways around Vancouver for various reasons."

To help deal with the jurisdictional challenges, the VPD Marine Squad takes a cooperative approach with other agencies: "Part of our beat includes the most treasured urban marine mooring and docking area in Canada — False Creek," explains Gillespie. "A few years back the Port Authority withdrew its obligations for looking after False Creek. That left any kind of patrolling or enforcement of anchoring restrictions totally up to the City. But city bylaws cannot apply to federal waterways like False Creek. Over the years some boat owners have assumed a kind of "squatters' right" in claiming anchorage for their boats and other floating possessions. Transport Canada, the City of Vancouver, the VPD, along with some local marinas came together and last summer arrived at the False Creek Anchoring Restrictions legislation. Now we have some authority to enforce anchorage restrictions in False Creek."

A critical aspect of policing is communications. In addition to the sophisticated, specialized VPD radio network, the waterfront team is also able to use standard VHF marine radio channels. This allows the team to communicate easily with Coast Guard, ferries, and commercial vessels. The increasing use of GPS technology is also aiding surveillance and law enforcement.

VPD marine vessels are able to access PRIME (Police Records Information Management Environment), a BC customized police IT system. PRIME is an integral part of the quasi-municipal Emergency Communications for Southwest BC Corporation (E-Comm), which integrates the waterfront team with all first responders during a regional emergency (see “On Guard for Thee,” **Mariner Life**, October 2006).

The team monitors the marine VHF emergency channel 16, and with the advent of mobile cell phones recreational boaters are encouraged to use 911 during emergencies, which allows them to be connected with the VPD Marine Squad if necessary. As part of the “Lock It or Lose It” program, boaters and marine operators are encouraged to report non-emergencies that involve marine related crime directly to the Marine Squad Office, telephone 604-717-2791.

Through the Internet, marine operators are able to share information and photos about individuals, break-ins, and other law infractions. This sharing of information among local and regional marine communities is encouraged by VPD’s Marine Squad as a critical part of crime prevention on the waterfront.

### Protecting Property: Land Versus Water

Policing is about ensuring compliance with the law. On land, the most common societal infraction to draw police attention is the improper use of one’s car. On the water, boats play a parallel role to cars, but managing compliance around boats is challenging. Canada doesn’t have the means to identify marine vessels like automobiles are documented. A car’s vehicle identification number (VIN) is easily traceable from the squad car on land. A marine vessel’s hull identification number (HIN) often has little reliability in providing history on the vessel’s current or previous ownership and location. Numbers are the traceable footprint; the HIN, official decal numbers, engine numbers, radio numbers, telephone numbers, and so on — any numbers that can be linked back to an individual, an insurance company, a manufacturer, a bank, or a government file or office, are all used in tracing boat ownership.

Limitation in identification makes it easy for organized crime to steal boats. “The order comes in for a particular type of boat,” explains Constable Jamie Gibson “and their scouts check out the marinas. When the boat is spotted its acquisition is organized with military precision. In their secured moorings, all numbers are removed or altered, and the boat’s



Photo courtesy Vancouver Police Department

*The VPD Marine Squad is equipped with a 30-foot custom-built aluminum patrol boat and a rigid-hull inflatable. By comparison, the Toronto Police Marine Unit has 13 vessels ranging from Sea-Doos to a 44-foot patrol boat.*

appearance is changed. It is easy to transport a stolen boat across provincial and international borders or put it in a container to ship abroad. Most stolen boats range in value between \$30,000 to over \$100,000.”

Gibson adds, “Insurance companies can take a double whammy. Besides having to pay for stolen boats, it is possible for a boat to exist on paper only. The process for registering a boat is done via the Internet or faxing in papers to government. There is no inspection of the property as is the case for a car registration. Once an individual possesses a government certificate stating the ownership and value of the boat a bank could give a loan for all or part of this value, which an insurance company will cover. After a few payments of the premium and the bank loan the boat is reported as stolen and a claim made against the insurance policy.”

In order to overcome these problems Gibson is developing a database in which all boats can be registered following verification of ownership. Besides its value in the tracing of the boat if stolen, this database is used to verify with owners that their boat is being used appropriately and with their knowledge. Registration in this database occurs when marinas participate in crime awareness session, which the team is always pleased to schedule.

Marine craft identification problems are not limited to Canada. The International Association of Marine Investigators (IAMI) serves to encourage governments to develop infrastructure, similar to car registration, allowing boat ownership and sale transactions to be recorded as with cars. IAMI serves to educate its members about marine law enforcement.



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Another day at the office — Constables Paul Auclair and Dave Horne return to headquarters after their patrol. The squad consists of 14 constables and one corporal who patrol the city's waterways year-round.

In addition to dealing with commonplace crime like theft, the Marine Squad must also prepare for the unexpected. With the increasingly opulent private yachts being acquired by wealthy Vancouverites the possibility of a major crime, like kidnapping such a vessel, has to be considered. In such situations the Marine Squad would work with VPD's Emergency Response Team. New regulations can be one solution to minimize unexpected events: In our post-9/11 world most urban American marine communities have security perimeters at the base of bridge support footings, 15-metre exclusionary zones that restrict vessels from approaching the bridge supports. There are no such restrictions enforced around any bridges in Vancouver. The lack of such restrictions is seen as a sense of complacency, an overall belief that, "it won't happen here."

## Changing Times

The Port of Vancouver has been, and continues to be, the focus of tremendous change as the city has grown, new neighbouring municipalities have developed around it, and the global cargo and tourism business expands exponentially. Along with this growth there is inevitably going to be increasing opportunities for criminal activity. Port authorities are managing these potential threats by investing in fencing, cameras, and restricting access using card access, truck licensing schemes and so on (see "Domestic Maritime Security," *Mariner Life* January 2007). Ports are concerned with ensuring their premises are secure to guarantee efficient flow of commerce. Private security firms provide the next level of security. Private security personnel have citizenry powers as defined by Criminal Code for Powers of Arrest. They rely on the VPD for backup.

Currently the Port of Vancouver, including Delta Port, is set to embark upon a merger with the Fraser River Port and North Fraser Port to establish a single Port Authority. This organization will likely embrace single private security arrangements. How these arrangements will relate to the VPD Marine Squad is in the process of being defined. Under the present arrangements the only way the VPD would be doing any enforcement outside of Vancouver is by request from another municipality. Plans are in place for establishing a Regional Marine Police Enforcement Team. This entity would have staffing from all waterfront municipalities. Since it would be policing federal property there is some opinion that the government of Canada should support such arrangements, although to date the federal government has expressed no interest in such an initiative.

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With the increasing complexity of service delivery, marine policing services in the Lower Mainland will need to be benchmarked with other marine urban communities. The Toronto Police Marine Unit has one 44-foot and four 30-foot hard bottom patrol boats, four 30-foot rigid hull inflatable vessels (one with an enclosed cabin), two Sea-Doos, a service boat and a 38-foot VIP historic boat. A staff inspector and staff sergeant administer the unit, which has a contingency of nine sergeants and 38 Police Officers, five full time mechanics and three crewmen. The Seattle Police Marine Unit has a similar fleet of boats that works in conjunction with other federal, state and private security arrangements.

### The Art of Policing

Effective policing at the community level means gaining the trust of the community; including trust in the law enforcement personnel to act professionally in accordance with the laws of the jurisdiction they administer. Establishing contacts with marine communities along their beat is an integral part of what the VPD Marine Squad does. This is highlighted in their leadership role in the Harbour Watch Program (see "Domestic Maritime Security," **Mariner Life** January 2007).

The Port of Vancouver borders eight municipalities, each with their own fire and police departments, and there are several federal and provincial jurisdictions that need to be acknowledged and respected. Against this background it is the individual police officer on the beat who defines the relative contribution that the service makes in the community. Consider these examples from the VPD files:





Constable Jamie Gibson surveys the scene in English Bay. The Marine Squad patrols 100 miles of shoreline that includes the port, waterfront businesses, marinas and parklands.

VPD Waterfront Team member Jamie Gibson found information suggesting that a visit to a marina in South Surrey would be worthwhile. After spending some time at the marina with a colleague they noticed a late 1990s model vessel that had a new series BC Vessel License decal displayed on its hull. A closer look revealed that the boat's Hull Identification Number had been removed from the stern's starboard corner. The boat was confiscated and later identified as stolen from Kelowna in 2005.

While on patrol manoeuvring the **R.G. McBeath** through False Creek one afternoon, Constable Paul Auclair noticed a boat coming towards him that caused a second look. As the boat approached he realized the person at the helm was wear-

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Manoeuvring the **R.G. McBeath** under the Lions Gate Bridge, Constable Paul Auclair keeps one eye open for marine traffic, and one eye open for possible suspicious activities.

ing a leather jacket. When the boat passed he further noticed the person was also wearing leather cowboy boots. Describing the event he said, "This was most unusual, it just didn't fit." He did a U-turn to check out the boat and discovered that it was in the process of being stolen.

The critical role of the police is upholding the law where danger prevails and others fear to venture. On land there is always back up, but checking out a boat on the water doesn't provide the same degree of security. For example, the Richmond RCMP called on the VPD Marine Squad for backup when they had a call about a boater using a rifle. Not having a dedicated police vessel, they initially tried to make use of an available Canadian Coast Guard vessel but were informed that CCG personnel were not required to place themselves in harm's way in these types of law-enforcement situations.

It took forty-five minutes for the VPD to respond, pick up the RCMP, and proceed to the location where the rifle was being branded. The presence of the police rapidly restored order and they were able to defuse the situation. That the team was able to respond to the call, and achieve a favourable outcome, is a testament to their dedication and professionalism. But the fact that they had to go to such lengths to help out is proof that the Lower Mainland's busy coastline needs more dedicated police resources. Because right now, enforcing the law on our waters can be a lonely business indeed. 

*Tim Lynch is a public policy analyst living in Steveston. Other marine and fishing policy articles can be read at [www.infolyнк.ca/bcfishpolicy.html](http://www.infolyнк.ca/bcfishpolicy.html). Send comments to [tim@infolyнк.ca](mailto:tim@infolyнк.ca).*

## For Information

VPD Marine Squad website  
[www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/police/operations/marine](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/police/operations/marine)

Police Records Information Management Environment (PRIME)  
[www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/police/Support/comm/prime.htm](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/police/Support/comm/prime.htm)

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