

Geraldton marine volunteers to the rescue

A possible tragedy was averted by members of Geraldton Volunteer Marine Rescue Group (GVMRG) in November when two local men were safely plucked from the waters off Drummond Cove, or Drummonds to the locals.

Below the Group's Commander Brian McClymans tells the story.

The sailors had apparently launched their four metre dinghy at the Town Beach boat ramp about 6am to check their cray pots off Pages Beach, but were unaware that strong winds and a heavy swell had been forecast.

About an hour and a half later, one of the pots snagged on the bottom while it was being winched in.

Before they had time to release the rope a wave broke over the stern, overturning their boat and throwing the pair clear. The wind then started pushing them in a northerly direction.

The alarm was not raised until 8am when one of the men failed to turn up for golf. After a series of phone calls it was ascertained they had not returned to shore.

At 9.45am a family member contacted the duty radio monitor at GVMRG to report the men overdue.

Rescue procedures were immediately started and less than an hour later a volunteer crew comprising Jim McCombe, Jason Jupp and Gary Corbett, were on the water in the group's craft Nashira.

Meanwhile, the two stricken men who had stayed with their upturned dinghy had decided their best option was to head for land. Using their life jackets like boogie boards, they began the long journey to shore.

The initial stages of the search were hampered by the minimal information available. All that was known was that the pair had been in an aluminium dinghy with a Mercury outboard and the location was between the Town Beach boat ramp and Point Moore.

At 10.36am the crew aboard Australian Maritime Safety Authority's (AMSA) Perth based Dornier aircraft, which was on a routine patrol, reported they had



▲ GVMRG volunteer Gary Corbett assists the two men after the rescue crew had safely returned them to Geraldton.

picked up a distress beacon signal off Geraldton. The position was pinpointed to an area approximately eight kilometres west of Drummonds.

The GVMRG rescue crew immediately headed to that location but were unable to pick up the signal. At 11.15am the AMSA aircraft reported that the distress transmission had ceased 15 minutes earlier. Shortly afterwards the Police said they were unsure if an EPIRB was included in the boat's safety gear.

A few minutes later the crew aboard our rescue vessel arrived at the point indicated by the beacon signal and commenced a search.

One of the crew members quickly spotted a red signal flare to the east of their position. By midday the two very grateful and relieved men were helped aboard the rescue craft after their five hour ordeal.

Shortly afterwards the dinghy was located some distance to the west and taken in tow for the long trip back to Geraldton.

When questioned by the crew, the men explained that because they did not think anyone was searching and the wind was forcing them further north, they opted to leave their stricken craft and strike out for shore using the swell to help them along.

While progress had been good, there was still nearly three kilometres to go when they were picked up, and the

men risked getting hypothermia from extended exposure in the water.

Shortly after 2pm both men were finally returned to dry land and reunited with relieved family and friends.

It was then established that one of the rescued men had activated a radio beacon. Unknowingly though he had purchased an obsolete personal locator beacon designed for land use by bushwalkers, four wheel drivers and people working in remote areas.

This type of beacon is not picked up by satellite and does not float. The man had placed it under his shirt, effectively blocking transmission.

The pair had been lucky to survive. If it were not for the AMSA aircraft being around at the time and picking up the signal, the outcome could have been very different.

Had the boat owner been a registered member of GVMRG, all his boat details and safety equipment would have been listed and the group would have known what they were looking for.

Not logging in their trip with the group meant that the search was delayed by nearly two hours, whereas search and rescue procedures are commenced within five minutes of any vessel failing to log off.

We were all extremely relieved that the incident had a satisfactory outcome, but prefer not to rely on luck for success.