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Ice rescue drill turns into more than practice

By Mitch Hotts, Macomb Daily Staff Writer

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A team of Macomb County Sheriff's deputies bring ashore a Harrison Township man who fell into Lake St. Clair while riding an all-terrain vehicle. He suffered only minor hypothermia, police said.



Photo courtesy of Ron Murphy, Macomb County Sheriff's Office

Talk about good timing — a team of Macomb County Sheriff's deputies was conducting an ice rescue drill Wednesday afternoon when a local man riding an all-terrain vehicle fell into an open-water area of Lake St. Clair near Harrison Township.

The deputies used their new "secret weapon," an inflatable vessel, to assist the Harrison Township man back to shore, where he was treated for mild hypothermia after hanging on to the edge of an ice floe where the 8-foot-deep water was a frigid 32 degrees.

"It was our first time training with the equipment and we may have already saved a life," said Lt. Gary Paoella, head of the sheriff's marine patrol division.

"Was he in any danger? Absolutely. When people fall into such cold water, hypothermia can rapidly set in. But he seemed to be doing pretty well when we got him into shore," Paoella said.

The 55-year-old Harrison Township man, whose name was not released, told rescuers, "I'm fine, I'm not cold at all," as he was treated by Harrison Township firefighters at Lukas Marina on Conger Bay where the fire department, sheriff's deputies and the U.S. Coast Guard had set up a command post. After being treated, he was released.

The incident began about 1 p.m. after two people on shore saw the man fall from his ATV into an open section of the lake about three miles from shore. Much of the lake is covered with ice and anglers have shanties and other vehicles on the ice, despite thawing temperatures.

As the witnesses called 911 for help, five deputies were involved in a training exercise at the marine patrol headquarters on South River Road. They were working with a new Fortuna vessel that was purchased by the 70-member reserve marine patrol officers for \$3,000.

The device, similar to a raft, has a hole in the hull that can be placed over a victim in the

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water. The victim can then be pulled onto the vessel without rescuers having to jump into the water.

The marine patrol members, who were wearing special ice rescue suits that can act as floatable devices, fell into the water themselves eight times as they walked out to where the victim was stuck at, Paoella said. Deputies Wayne Rickert and Gary Wiegand finally found the man partially submerged and were able to remove him from the water.


The equipment, training and suits are all part of Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel's efforts to create a specialized ice rescue team. Numerous ice rescues are performed every year in Lake St. Clair as anglers and others are often trapped on ice floes or fall into water due to weak ice.

Lt. Robert Knapp of the Harrison Township Fire Department said warming temperatures in southeastern Michigan have made traveling on the ice treacherous even if the ice appears to be solid.

"People really need to pay attention to where they're going when the ice is like this," said Knapp. "You can last a couple of minutes in the water in this weather, but that's about it."

Sheriff's officials say their rule-of-thumb is there is no safe ice no matter the time of year.

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