This man just might save your life

You might not know his name, but Richard Hiscock is responsible for many advances in boating safety

By Douglas A. Campbell

A Canadian family of four — mother, father and two teenage sons — by 9 p.m. on the last Sunday in August had been stranded on Lake Champlain for 10 hours in their disabled 20-foot powerboat. Strong winds from the south had blown all day up the 25-mile fetch between Vermont and New York, creating 6-foot breaking waves near the shore of Providence Island in South Hero. Anchored there, the small boat bucked violently, though it somehow managed to stay afloat. Efforts by a Coast Guard boat and a local police boat to rescue the family had failed. The 43-year-old father, his 44-year-old wife, and the sons, 17 and 15, were conscious but hypothermic.

The slender lifeline that could lead to the family’s survival included Brian Laubenstein, a 45-year-old Coast Guard rescue swimmer aboard a helicopter en route from Cape Cod, Mass., 200 miles to the south. Another critical link in that chain, 61-year-old Richard Hiscock, was drifting toward sleep in his home part-way up the slope between Lake Champlain and the nearest peak in the Green Mountains, unaware of the unfolding drama. That was OK. Hiscock’s role, although vital, was remote.

More important for the moment were the efforts of Laubenstein and the three other crewmen aboard the Jayhawk helicopter. They had flown through zero visibility in rain and fog, picking their way over the mountains, and at 9:05 p.m. they hovered above the lake, assessing their options. There were few. So Laubenstein, a 14-year veteran swimmer, clipped onto his cable and headed for the water below. In 14 minutes he had loaded first the mother, then her sons and husband, into the Jayhawk’s rescue basket.

Another successful rescue swimmer mission. Another reason for boaters to thank their obscure benefactor, Richard C. Hiscock.

On any given day, on scores of computers around the nation, a blizzard of e-mails concerning maritime safety arrive from Hiscock. These are stories culled from newspapers and magazines as well as announcements and reports by the Coast Guard, other government agencies and professional groups. They are sent to individuals, in various fields, whom Hiscock has encountered over the last 30 years, since he first became obsessed with safety at sea. As a cross-pollinator of maritime information, he is a vital link between people whose interests include marine safety in all its forms. The names in his computer address book include many of those working on the front lines of boating safety, from the corridors of Congress to the office suites of admirals, from journalists to life raft repackers.

As a civilian, Hiscock over the decades has written a Coast Guard safety manual for commercial fishermen, helped draft the 1986 federal law governing commercial fishing safety, served as an expert witness on safety issues, and worked as a marine claims investigator. He has written several papers promoting the cause of boating safety and criticizing the Coast Guard for what he sees as the agency’s failures. Through these experiences he has, according to those who have worked with him, accumulated in his head an encyclopedic knowledge of the issues and history of marine safety.

“He has so much knowledge now he doesn’t know how much he has,” says retired Coast Guard Commander L.P. “Bud” Minott. “He sees something, and he’s able to project, sometimes decades down the road, what will happen. And he’s not afraid to say it.”

“He’s been one of my best-kept secrets,” says Scott Leonard, a construction representative in New England for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “The man is semiretired, and he still provides me with extremely valuable news and updates from his contacts on the Hill and his contacts in the industry.”

“He’s just such a resource,” says Suzanne Bolton, a former congressional aide who now works for the National Marine Fisheries Service.

“He played probably a totally unrecognized role, except to those of us who know, in the history of the [Coast Guard] rescue swimmer program and how we got it,” says Alan M. Steinman, M.D., a retired Coast Guard physician. “I certainly would give him kudos for it.”

Not only does Hiscock work in near anonymity, but most of his efforts in the realm of marine safety are voluntary. Fame and wealth clearly aren’t his motives. Rather, he seems driven by the same buried force that causes some ocean fish to spawn in the rivers where they were hatched. Certainly, it has a lot to do with fishing.

The Hiscock family moved to Cape Cod in 1951, to a home 500 feet from the ocean. Young Richard was 6 years old. “Age 8, I learned to row,” he recalls. “I went down to the fish pier and watched the fish boats come in.”

In that Chatham, Mass., home echoed the conversations of his parents about their government service during World War II. Earl and Alice Hiscock had met in Washington, D.C., in the Coast Guard Emergency Rescue Equipment section, where he, a lieutenant commander, was assigned as a technical aide and she was in charge of exhibits. Before the war Earl Hiscock had worked in testing new ideas in life-saving and rescue equipment — such items as signal mirrors, fluorescent dye, kites, night distress signals and reflective buttons for life jackets. In the ERE, he had been involved in pushing the Coast Guard to adopt these items and lightweight survival suits for Navy fliers.

When the war ended and the hunt for communists began under Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the world seemed to forget about the ERE suggestions, and the Hiscoks...
moved to Chatham, on the pointy elbow of Cape Cod, and acquired a string of small boats. “I started to learn about boats,” Hiscock says. “My father would have all these talks about his experiences … the development of mirrors, water purification, fishing kits. All that stuff was hanging out in the office, and it all had a story.”

After high school Hiscock enrolled at American University in Washington, but his academic life was cut short by a draft notice in 1966. Already registered as a conscientious objector, Hiscock was assigned to work in a Boston hospital. The job dealt with creating charts and graphs and included work in a photo lab. Hiscock acquired some photography skills, and in 1969, back in civilian life, he started shooting pictures for local newspapers on Cape Cod.

“I more and more started focusing on marine photography,” he says. “In the early ’70s a friend of mine got the job as a photo lab technician in Chatham. I started hanging out in the office. It was a great opportunity to do marine photography and to get out on the water.”

One day in 1976 Hiscock was the first to arrive on the scene of a boat fire, “a beautiful, Maine-built lobster boat, burned pretty badly,” he says. “The Coast Guard put the fire out, but there wasn’t too much left of the boat. The guy who owned her, his father was a master craftsman. He took the boat to his father’s workshop and rebuilt it over the winter. I got the word he was looking for some cedar.”

On his own, Hiscock got the names of some people with cedar to sell and left a message with the lobsterman. “The next spring I saw him and he invited me to work as stem man,” he says. For the next two summers — 1977 and 1978 — Hiscock worked lobstering aboard the 57-foot Benjo, tending up to 75 lobster pots. “I learned a lot. The first summer I didn’t even have a radar first month or so, no Loran, no radar raft or immersion suit,” he says.

It was during Hiscock’s second summer on Benjo that one event focused his attention on the safety needs of commercial fishermen. “We had a bad storm go through in September, a bad north-west gale,” he says. “A lot of boats got caught out in that storm, too, a lot of small boats out of Chatham. The radio was full of people in trouble. The next Monday we were back out fishing again, and the Coast Guard was issuing a pan man message. ‘Capt. Cosmo is reported overdue.’ That went on for days.”

Hiscock recalls that the search for Capt. Cosmo lasted nine days, covered 164,000 square miles, and included flights by a U-2 spy plane. “They never found anything,” he says. Hiscock learned that while Capt. Cosmo was wearing his survival suit, they had no emergency position indicating radio beacon. (Primitive models were available at the time.) And he discovered, in this case at least, that Coast Guard searchers had no idea what color survival suit they should be looking for in the ocean.

“I began to explore and do my own homework on more specifically what were the requirements for commercial fishing vessels for safety,” says Hiscock. “I found to my horror that the only regulations that applied were the Motor Boat Act of 1940, which, it so happened, my father had been involved in writing. I thought. This is a little out of date. We ought to be improving the standards for commercial fishing boats.”

Hiscock says one more incident “galvanized” his interest. It came two years later, in 1980, when, as he says, a “sneak northeaster came up under the cloud cover,” un detects by satellites and, therefore, not predicted by the National Weather Service. Boats and lives were lost, and a widow sued.

“My question was, ‘Doesn’t anybody carry a harometer anymore?’” — says Hiscock. “If the bottom’s falling out of the glass, you’ve got to know something’s coming.”

By the time of that storm, Hiscock’s question wasn’t even asked. He had attended a conference on hypothermia and had written a paper on his father’s involvement in the development, two decades earlier, of survival suits.

A Coast Guard Public Service Commendation in 1984 suggests some of Hiscock’s efforts in the following four years. “Since 1980, Mr. Hiscock has been actively involved in advancing [the protection of life and property at sea] through legislative and regulatory review and by providing critical input,” the citation reads. “For the past two years, Mr. Hiscock has been a driving force behind the rewrite and republication of the First District Fishermen’s Digest,” which he “skillfully edited and rewrote.” Moreover, in March 1984, the citation says, Hiscock volunteered his local knowledge when a cargo ship grounded on Cape Cod, contributing to the “successful coordination of this mission.”

Hiscock went on to play a critical role, working with his congressman, Gerry E. Studds (D-Mass.) in writing the Fishing Vessel Safety Act of 1988, which was adopted following the failure of a similar bill in 1986.

“There’s no question that the adoption of the 1988 act and regulations in 1991 that required all [fishing] vessels carry certain equipment saved some lives,” Hiscock says. “When I see those [reports of saved lives] that puts a warm spot in my heart.”

From time to time, Hiscock has been gainfully employed in jobs relating to his mission. He was executive director of the U.S. Lifesaving Manufacturers Association from 1984 to 1986, and an officer in Marine Safety Consultants Inc. in Fairhaven, Mass., investigating marine casualties, from 1987 to 1991. And since 1993 he has served as a director of the Marine Safety Foundation, a non-profit foundation focusing on “advancing the safety of life and property at sea through research, education and coordination.”

His resume is packed with other affiliations and volunteer positions, as well.