FIELD REPORT

State Parks Rescue Captured on Camera at Carmel-by-the-Sea

Story from: James Northhelfer, Monterey District

Carmel-by-the-Sea resident Calvin Clack captured Lifeguard II David Buckalew rescuing a body surfer on Monday, December 17. Photo from Calvin Clack.

A high-surf advisory was in effect earlier this week from Sonoma County to Monterey County. In Carmel-by-the-Sea, a local resident was taking photos of the big surf when he happened to capture a surf rescue on camera.

While this happened in the City of Carmel-by-the-Sea, which is not part of the State Park System, our state park lifeguards respond to all 911 calls for an aquatic rescue within Monterey District. On Monday, Dec. 17, Seasonal Lifeguard II David Buckalew swam through large dangerous surf to rescue a body surfer. David eventually swam the victim out to a U.S. Coast Guard vessel.

There was a National Weather Service high surf warning and the local monitoring buoy was measuring waves 21 feet high every 19 seconds. State Park Ranger Zach Haney helped from shore by guiding David to the victims, using hand signals. State Park Lifeguard Supervisor James Northhelfer was preparing to launch a rescue water craft, also known as a Personal Water Craft (PWC), but it was not needed.

Once David ensured the victim was safely aboard the Coast Guard's 47-foot motor lifeboat, he swam back to shore through the large surf. CAL FIRE, Carmel Fire and Carmel Police Department provided incident management and logistics.

The Coast Guard boat transported the victim to the nearby Stillwater pier in Pebble Beach. He was evaluated by AMR. The victim was an experienced swimmer and water polo player who had been body surfing at 4th Street without fins when a rip current pulled him away from shore.

Our group worked as a team to safely affect a successful rescue. This is a testament to great training and agencies working together toward a common goal.

Below is the email from the photographer who captured the rescue:

Dear Parks Department,

On Monday, December 17, 2018, my wife and I walked to the local beach, here in Carmel-By-The-Sea, to shoot pictures of the massive ocean swell that hit the California coastline. As we were setting up, we noticed a person running full speed towards the beach break, which was excessively large and ugly looking. Our first thought being it was a belly boarder getting a running start to hit the water, swim out into the takeoff spot and start catching waves.

However, we soon realized it was a rescue operation unfolding right before our camera lenses. After this rescue ended, I told the State Parks employee, who performed the rescue, that I had shot pictures of his rescue and would try and get the them into his possession.

Please forward the following link to him. It was a textbook rescue operation, not only by your employee, but by all those departments involved, and it was his amazing efforts that really moved us. A huge congratulations to him, his training and your department in providing this service.

Note: These photographs were shot with a 300mm telephoto with a 2X converter, so it may look like the people are close to the shore, but in fact were probably 150 yards plus, off the beach.

To view all of the photos, click here.

Thanks in advance.

Regards,
Calvin E. Clack
Carmel-by-the-Sea resident

Top: High-surf advisory from Sonoma County to Monterey County earlier this week. Bottom: U.S. Coast Guard motor lifeboat and helicopter assist in rescue. Photos from Calvin Clack, Carmel-by-the-Sea resident