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Chincoteague Beacon

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CG's Rescue 21 tower among first in country

New communications tower will enhance local unit's search-and-rescue capabilities, homeland security

By **STEPHEN FURNESS**

Coast Guard Station Chincoteague held a groundbreaking ceremony last Tuesday for its new communications tower, which will vastly improve search and rescue efficiency.

The Rescue 21 tower on Chincoteague will be one of the first in the nation, and is superior in practically every aspect to the existing communication tower, Lt. Cmdr. Ronald LaBrec said.

The Coast Guard has implemented a \$611 million program to modernize its emergency communications system via the National Distress and Response System Modernization Project, or Rescue 21.

"With Rescue 21 we're going to be able to hear more, we're going to be able to respond quicker to distress, and it's going to improve communications for our operations, and homeland security," LaBrec said. "So it's really a unique system, a great system."

The current communications tower was first installed in the 1970s and is no longer able to handle the operations and communication traffic. The technology is antiquated, with many parts for the radios no longer in production.

The current tower does not allow for protected communications, which means that important national security, intelligence, or patient privacy information can be heard by anyone with a scanner or radio.



PHOTO COURTESY OF COAST GUARD

Coast Guard Station Chincoteague's color guard stands watch at the recent dedication of the Rescue 21 communications tower.

UPDATE

- Coast Guard Station Chincoteague is one of the first units in the country to receive the state-of-the-art Rescue 21 communications tower, which replaces the obsolete system installed in the 1970s. Rescue 21 is



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Also, Coast Guard members are able to communicate on only one channel. And with four Coast Guard stations in the area, and many boats running search and rescue operations at one time, the ability to talk on several channels is very important.

expected to increase search-and-rescue capabilities, as well as better protect homeland security.

Rescue 21 will allow Coast Guard members and boat operators all the necessities that the present tower does not. This includes continuous radio coverage from the shore out to 20 nautical miles. Rescue 21 is fully capable of picking up the transmissions of a one-watt radio -- the smallest handheld radio available -- as far as 20 miles out. The more powerful the radio wattage is, the farther out Rescue 21 will be able to detect it.

When a distress call is received, Rescue 21 can give the boat's position using latitude/longitude coordinates or line bearing with a two-degree plus or minus error. Also, there will be six available channels for constant communication and way to patch in a telephone call to the local police agencies.

Rescue 21 also has asset tracking, which allows all Coast Guard boats to be in constant communication with the system. This feature will enable the search and rescue controller at the station to identify exactly where each boat is. This feature is especially important during extreme weather conditions.

"The couple of fatalities we've had in the Coast Guard in the last probably eight years, asset tracking would have helped because we would have known where they (boats) were quicker," LeBrec said.

LeBrec said one aspect that will be particularly useful is a digital selective calling feature.

Boaters that own radios with the digital selective calling option can simply push a button and their radio will automatically transmit a distress call that will be picked up by Rescue 21, as well as any other boat around that has the feature.

The boaters' name, phone number, position, and any other pertinent information will be broadcast.

LeBrec reminds boaters who own this feature to fill out the information card that accompanies the radio, and to make sure that their radio is connected to the GPS receiver. If these two requirements are not fulfilled, the digital selective calling feature actually becomes more of a hindrance because the Coast Guard station will only receive a microsecond distress burst, which is not enough time to successfully locate the position of the call.

"It's a great feature if they properly use it. Otherwise, it detracts from it," LeBrec said.

Rescue 21 is expected to be operating by September.

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