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Ocean Safety with KFD's James Pelegrino

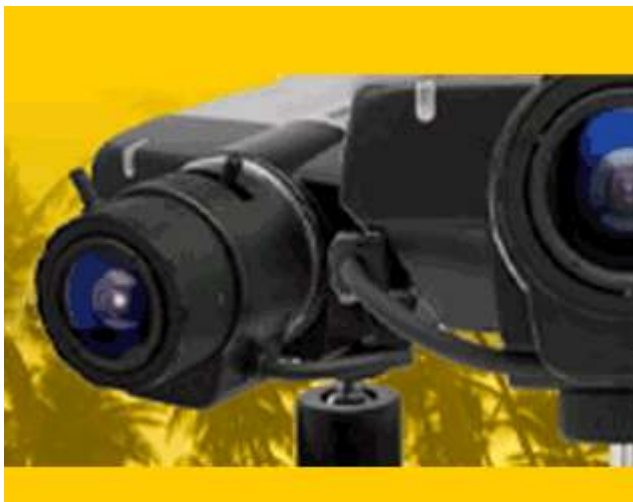
By Jon Letman - Special to The Garden Island

Posted: Wednesday, May 19, 2004 - 01:01:23 am HST

Editor's note: This is the third in a series of articles on ocean safety.

After five o'clock, when the lifeguards go home, who responds to emergency calls at the beach? And who trains those who save lives off the shores of Kauai? That responsibility belongs to James Pelegrino, Kauai Fire Department fire fighter and lead instructor for the K.F.D.'s ocean safety training program.

Speaking at his home in Kalaheo, Pelegrino describes how he and fellow instructors Tim Stokesbury and Jeff Weiss train new fire fighters and rescue personnel under United States Lifesaving Association (U.S.L.A.) standards.



First, rookie fire fighters visit all districts of the island, focusing much of their time on the north shore, near Kapa'a and in Po'ipu, where most rescue calls are generated. Equipped with masks, fins, snorkels, buoyant "rescue tubes," rescue (surf) boards and jet skis, the trainees study on site at common danger points to discuss what type of accidents frequently occur.

"We go to Lumaha'i and have the guys swim out and see where they are probably going to be rescuing people. They have to swim down to the bottom so they are familiar with the sea floor and conditions that exist," Pelegrino says.

During the one week U.S.L.A. course trainees are also required to swim from Queen's Bath to the Hanalei Pier and from Ke'e beach to Hanakapi'ai beach, and not necessarily during flat sunny summer days. "In a rescue, sometimes you have to run out into cold, dark, rough water," Pelegrino says.

"They need to get used to swimming in tough conditions," Pelegrino says. This physical in-the-water training, along with an extensive classroom education make



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up what Pelegrino calls their "bread and butter" — the basics of ocean safety and rescue.

Veteran fire rescue personnel also go through an annual re-certification in which participants must complete a 500-yard swim in ten minutes or less as well as demonstrate their skills using paddle boards, rescue tubes and the use of current and surf conditions.

Citing a well known rescue maxim, Pelegrino says, "'Risk a lot to save a lot, risk a little to save a little.' We don't want to unnecessarily risk losing another life to recover a lost body, but we will go all the way to help someone in trouble."

Pelegrino, based out of the Koloa Fire Station, has twenty-two years experience in ocean safety and rescue training, going back to his days as a junior lifeguard in Long Beach, California.

"Most drowning incidents on Kaua'i," observes Pelegrino, "stem from the fact that we have so many large, isolated beaches. But that is part of the mystique and attraction of Kaua'i for visitors." He is quick to add that remote beaches are not the only place where risks exist. Seemingly relatively "safe beaches" like Brenneke's and Baby Beach near Koloa Landing can lull swimmers into a false sense of security.

Pelegrino notes that often rescues are made by bystanders and nearby surfers who see someone in distress and go out to save them. Because these incidents usually go unreported, there is no way to know the exact frequency or contributing factors.

When asked about drowning prevention, Pelegrino agrees that warning signs and the presence of lifeguards are important, but says that "education (especially for visitors) is key." Pelegrino feels that beach safety information should be made available to visitors from the moment they step onto their Kaua'i-bound plane to their hotel room all the way onto the beach.

Pelegrino's advice for beach goers and ocean enthusiasts is simple, "Be aware of your surroundings and know your limitations before you go in."

This the third and final report in a three-part Kaua'i water safety series.

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