

Water Safety, A Year-Round Necessity!

By Shawn Curtis, MCBJ Deputy Safety Director

CAMP FOSTER - As the cooler season quickly approaches, water enthusiasts are reminded to be extra vigilant when participating in open water activities. Most people associate water related accidents with summertime, the peak season for breaches. However, according to Installation Safety Office statistics, more Status Of Forces Agreement personnel have drowned in Okinawa's surrounding waters during the chilly months of October through March, than April through September. Most incidents occurred when wave action and or currents intensified as a result of northerly winds pushing down from the Pacific Ocean or East China Sea. Battling an increased sea state requires a lot of endurance, experience and skill, and without the ability to perform self rescue or receive timely emergency response, those entering the water will often succumb to the dangerous conditions.

When planning for water sports during this time of the year, it is important to monitor local weather and ocean conditions as they can change with little to no warning. Beachgoers should also enter the sea at a familiar location or popular site frequented by others. A best practice is to



conduct an assessment of the conditions, looking for indicators that the area may not be ideal for water entry such as the presence of rip currents. If there are any doubts, it's best to stay on shore or find a safer entry point. During the assessment, personnel should study the coastline to identify alternative egress areas in case the spot from which they entered becomes too hazardous or currents move them away from the location. Additionally, people should always inform a friend, relative, or command representative as to the area they are going to and their expected time of return.

This way, if an emergency does occur, response personnel will have a targeted position to begin a search. Another recommended measure is to carry a cell phone secured in a waterproof case and attached to the user. Make sure emergency contact numbers are preprogrammed into the phone before engaging water activities.

The water during this of time year cools and when compounded by seasonal winds, increases the likelihood of suffering from hypothermia or a low core body temperature and can also inhibit one's ability in the water. Several factors can be attributed to this serious condition including age, body structure, medical conditions, activity level, use of alcohol, medication, drugs or tobacco. To prevent the chances of exposure, ensure you are healthy, physically fit and plan ahead by preparing for less than ideal weather and water temperatures. Utilize protective clothing for the specific sport such as a wetsuit, dive or surf hood, swim cap, gloves and boots which provide an additional level of insulation and bring along a dry set of clothes to change into and a blanket for extra warmth once you exit the water. Furthermore, it's highly recommended to obtain certification in first aid and CPR to assist those in need. Most importantly, recognizing the onset of hypothermia and removing yourself from the conditions as soon as possible could mean the difference between life or death. And always remember, water safety is a year-round concern.