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URBAN GARDNER | Updated September 23, 2013, 10:13 p.m. ET

A Helping Hand at Sea

Ralph Gardner Jr. talks with Captain Joe Frohnhoefer

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



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Gordon M. Grant for The Wall Street Journal

A Sea Tow vessel in Southold Bay in Southold, N.Y.

Captain Joe Frohnhoefer pointed across Southold Bay towards a beach in the distance. "Sunday, Fourth of July weekend," he recalled. "The boat was 75 feet on the shore."

He was referring to a rescue, one of several performed that weekend by Sea Tow Eastern Long Island, part of the Sea Tow Services International network. It's an organization, of which Captain Frohnhoefer is the founder and CEO, that since 1983 has been rescuing boaters at sea, or in this case on land. Today they have 200,000 members and 96 franchisees from Long Island to California and the Caribbean. Nonmembers can also avail themselves of Sea Tow's services for a fee.

I wondered how any boat ends up that far ashore. The answer, of course, is that you get a running start. "The girl said, 'I was driving it; it was me,'" Mr. Frohnhoefer's son, Captain Joe Frohnhoefer III, remembered of the

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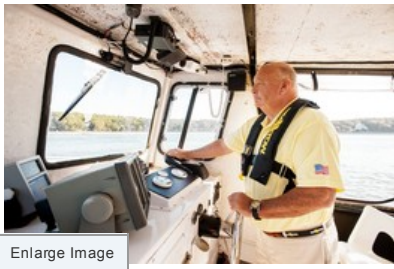


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Gordon M. Grant for The Wall Street Journal

Captain Joe Frohnhoefer founded Sea Tow Services International in 1983. The marine rescue service has 200,000 members and 96 franchises.

scene when he and his father arrived.

While I'm not a boater myself—the only vessel I own, besides a couple of toy boats, is a leaky rowboat which hasn't seen action in several seasons—and while I wasn't present, I just want to go on record and state that I have no doubt, this particular incident aside, that both sexes make equally talented, or incompetent, skippers.

And both Joes admit they could see how the situation arose. Behind the beach where the craft landed is a pond with a buoy bearing a green light. In the dark of night, especially a crystal clear night such as that was, unless you're familiar with the area it's easy to assume that nothing but interrupted water stands between the bay and the buoy.

But I was less interested in assigning blame than learning how a boat ends up so far ashore. "They just slid," Joe III explained. "The little pebbles on the beach act like ball bearings."

And perhaps even more important, how does one extricate such a vessel? According to the gentlemen, the incident occurred at high tide, so there was no hope of the water rising and doing the heavy lifting.

"You spin them around and walk them off," Joe Senior shrugged. "Left, right. Left, right. You might take some paint off the bottom."

Captain Frohnhoefer said he jumped into the marine rescue business in the early '80s when the Coast Guard, because of budget cuts, lack of manpower and the Guard's expanding roll for policing the nation's shores, opened nonemergency operations—such as towing, fuel drops, jump starts and the aforementioned unintentional grounding—to private businesses.

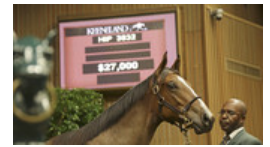
Mr. Frohnhoefer, sensing an opportunity, took out a \$30,000 loan and bought a boat, indeed the boat we were on—a now 30-year-old, but lovingly maintained, 24-foot Privateer. The job seemed tailor-made to his talents. He was a former marine police officer as well as an industrial-arts (meaning shop) and driver's ed teacher in the Freeport and Mattituck school systems, so he was obviously experienced at resisting the temptation to belittle others when they did boneheaded things.

Despite Captain Frohnhoefer's multiplicity of talents, there was an inherent problem with private maritime towing as a business proposition. It's hard to make a living, and repay a bank loan, when you're expected to be on call 24/7, 365 days a year—even if the phone rings, or rather the marine radio crackles to life, only sporadically. "If it rained, you wouldn't get tows," Georgia Frohnhoefer, Captain Frohnhoefer's wife and business partner, remembered. His daughter Kristen is also part of the company's senior management.

So they started selling memberships, much the way AAA does, at boat shows. Members would be guaranteed coverage, whether off Malibu or on the Hudson River, Sea Tow's local service provider coming to their rescue. "We had to develop an industry," Captain Frohnhoefer explained. "One of our federally registered trademarks is 'Your road service at sea.'"

So are the network's ships iconic yellow color, instantly recognizable in the marine assistance world. That's because sometimes not quite scrupulous freelancers would show up at boats in distress and masquerade as Sea Tow, some of them even painted yellow.

"I spent a lot of time in federal court," protecting the brand, Captain Frohnhoefer said.


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About Ralph Gardner Jr.

Ralph Gardner Jr. writes the Urban Gardner column Monday through Thursday. His works has also appeared in the New York Times, New York magazine, the New York Observer and the New Yorker. Write to Ralph at Ralph.gardner@wsj.com and follow him on Twitter [@Ralphgardnerjr](#).

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While Captain Frohnhoefer runs Sea Tow's national network, his passion for the sea and saving lives remains undiminished, and he often responds to calls personally. On 9/11, some of Sea Tow's boats helped transport New Yorkers fleeing the terrorist attacks from Manhattan across the East River to Brooklyn.

However, a typical job is far less dramatic, Captain Frohnhoefer said, the call going something like this:

"I broke down. I'm not quite sure where I am."

"Where did you leave from? Do you have a chart? Can you anchor your boat? Are you in imminent danger?" Every once in a while they say, 'I'm taking on water but the pumps are working.' All of a sudden we're hustling faster."

As we sped along Shelter Island, Captain Frohnhoefer showed me an innocuous looking image on his smartphone of a rudder shaft that its boat's owner had repaired on his own, the result being that the boat started taking on water, eventually sinking off "Bug Light," an Orient, Long Island, lighthouse.

"People try to do their own work and don't do it right," Captain Frohnhoefer sighed. "They think they're saving money."

But even a skipper with as much experience as he isn't immune to the sea's mood swings. He recalled the time when he and Joe III were on their way to rescue a boat that had lost power. The wind shifted to the west with the tide coming in the opposite direction. Suddenly the Privateer was standing atop a giant wave, plunging into its trough. "A 12-foot wave broke over the boat," Joe III remembered, the impact causing the windshield to pop out and fly into his father, deeply cutting his arm and chest and flooding the boat. They still managed to respond to the call and tow the customer to safety. But it was Captain Frohnhoefer who wound up heading to the hospital for stitches.

"We went way down and then we powered out," Captain Frohnhoefer said. "Let me tell you: If we didn't power out we'd have sunk."

The greatest current threat to recreational maritime safety isn't just clueless weekend skippers, he added, but a lack of courtesy on the seas—for example, yachts "waking" and swamping smaller boats, and perhaps serving as a metaphor for something larger in the national discourse.

"We've got a lot of that this year," Captain Frohnhoefer said. "Courtesy is something we need to reintroduce."

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