

**EYE IN THE SKY: Volunteer patrol goes up as sun goes down**

## BLACK SHEEP TO THE RESCUE

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A Cessna 172 flown by Ocean Black Sheep pilot Tom Woods from Monmouth Beach on Friday passes over Barnegat Bay near the Route 37 bridge.

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From 1,000 feet above the Mullica River, salt marshes are the lovely green of Ireland in spring, with the addition of spiraling creeks and ponds and channels. But this is summer in New Jersey, and down there in the bayside meadows, boaters are met by steaming heat, sucking muds, draining tides, squadrons of biting mosquitoes and greenhead horseflies. As the sun goes down, the Ocean Black Sheep go aloft in search of those who won't get home by dark.

"This is a primary area for us, which is why we check it before sundown," says Mike Maino of the Black Sheep, the volunteer civilian air wing for the Ocean County Sheriff's Department. "You can get caught in these lagoons on a falling tide and not find your way out."

On Friday evening, the group formally known as the Ocean Air Support Squadron Inc. flew another mission in what's been nearly 30 years of the Sunset Patrol, a volunteer aerial weekend sweep of coastal waters that started in the late 1970s.

Squadron aircrews provide aerial reconnaissance and photography for police and emergency agencies, communication and coordination during emergencies, and all-around, low-cost air support for local communities. Still, the Sunset Patrol mission attracts pilots and observers with the opportunity for that dramatic last-chance rescue.

Last year, the squadron's radio shack — a converted camping trailer with radio and computer gear at the Ocean County Airpark — picked up a call advising that a woman riding a personal watercraft was reported overdue in Great Bay.

About seven minutes after takeoff, John Hermack, a squadron pilot from Toms River who flies Boeing 767s for Continental Airlines and is a former F-16 fighter pilot with the New Jersey Air National Guard, was over the Sedge Islands behind Brigantine beach in his fast twin-engine Beechcraft 836 Bonanza.

"She was covered in mud, jumping up and down, waving to them. The greenheads were getting her," Maino says. Hermack orbited overhead, relaying the woman's position to the Coast Guard until rescuers arrived by boat.

### Weekend watch

Two-person pilot and observer crews fly on Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings from the airpark in Berkeley as far north as Shark River, and south to Little Egg Harbor Inlet and the

Mullica, searching not only bay and river waters, but also the ocean for after-hours swimmers in trouble.

They've located exhausted surfers and keep a special eye out in late summer for swimmers trapped on sandbars that offer deceptively shallow water at low tide, Maino says.

The Ocean County Board of Freeholders has supported the patrol since it started, and to this day the pilots who fly their own aircraft are reimbursed only for their costs in fuel and engine oil, says Larry Space, a retired pilot from Manchester, who heads the squadron.

Fixed-wing aircraft are far cheaper to operate than police helicopters, and recently the Black Sheep have been getting more high-profile tasks, such as tracking a carjacking in Berkeley, Space said.

Fliers who knew each other from earlier volunteer work with the Civil Air Patrol broke away to form the squadron seven years ago and chose the informal name Black Sheep "because nobody else wanted us," Space said with a laugh. The group's name also recalls that of a famed Marine air wing in the South Pacific during the early days of World War II that had a reputation for accomplishing missions — but at the expense of formal military discipline on the ground.

On this Friday evening, the patrol starts rolling down the taxiway and lining up on Runway 24 just after 5:30 p.m. There are three aircraft. On the radio, squadron operator Gary Rhodes of Manchester addresses them as male sheep: Ram 1, Ram 2 and Ram 3.

Hermack's Bonanza has Bill "Tiger" Maxwell of Beachwood as his observer. A Cessna 177 with the latest digital "glass cockpit" instrument display is flown by Tom Woods from Monmouth Beach, with Tiger's dad, Ken Maxwell of Beachwood, in the right-hand observer's seat. Pilot Rick Ewert and Maino, who both live in Lacey, are in Ewert's Piper PA-28 Cherokee, a single-engine plane with plenty of lift in its slab-shaped wings.

The planes split up on north-south lines to maximize the coverage before nightfall. New Jersey's boating safety drive, with its mandatory education for operators in the past decade, has significantly reduced the accident rate. But pilots say the popularity of personal watercraft, with operators less likely to carry marine radios or cell phones, leaves those solitary riders at risk of stranding.

### **Dumping ground**

A first inland stop for Ewert and Maino is an old sand mine in Manchester, where police and the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office have retrieved a number of cars and trucks from lakes on the site, wreckage of auto theft and insurance fraud.

Maino spotted a newly deep-sixed sport-utility vehicle a few days ago, and it's still there, underwater. He takes photos as Ewert pirouettes the Cherokee.

They head off northeast toward the beach, scanning the northern end of Barnegat Bay. Here an air patrol with a marine radio in their cockpit picked up the voice of a boater whose engine had died in the fast currents of the Point Pleasant Canal. The squadron radio shack relayed the message, and the boater got help as the BlackSheep crew flew off, Maino says.

At an altitude of 1,000 feet, Ewert points the Piper south along the beach. At this time of day, the traffic of ubiquitous banner advertising planes is usually done, the fliers say, and those that do fly are below at 800 feet.

Maino has Ewert turn over the barrier beach at Lavallette so he can snap a few photos of a local park. The Cherokee circles so beautifully that the fliers smile when it bumps slightly, running over its own twisted slipstream. Aerial imaging — or tactical photos, as the airmen call them — are helpful to volunteer municipal groups, like first aid squads, that can use the photos to navigate in late-night emergencies around marina docks or sand roads in the Pine Barrens that are not shown on maps or atlases.

### **Haze and fog**

There's little threat of thunderstorms this evening, but the oppressive humidity and high dew points bring on haze and evening fog. Ewert provides advisories on his positions to air traffic controllers at Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station, McGuire Air Force Base and Atlantic City International Airport.

Atlantic City asks that Hermack turn off the anti-collision transponder on his Bonanza. Still the single-seat fighter jockey at heart, he's so close to Ewert that controllers are getting signals from the safety device. "I don't like talking to so many people," Ewert admits, "but it's good to have them looking out for you when it's this hazy."

For all the chatter in the air, it's an oddly uncrowded evening down there on the water, considering the last-  
blast heat forecast for this weekend. Tices Shoal, a popular bayside anchorage at Island Beach State Park, has just 32 vessels at anchor, a mere 10 percent or less of what the place can look like on a summer weekend.

"But they will be out next weekend," Space predicts, after his pilots are back on the ground. "Labor Day is always the big one, no matter what the weather is like."