



Sheriff's Office recovers swimmer's body

Man disappeared Sept. 28 on Upper Straits Lake

By David Wallace
C & G Staff Writer

WEST BLOOMFIELD — The Oakland County Sheriff's Marine Division reported Sept. 29 that it recovered the body of a missing swimmer from Upper Straits Lake.

"They have recovered a body from the lake," confirmed Sgt. Wesley Beltz of the Oakland County Sheriff's Office. Beltz said he did not have any more information to report and the office would not release the person's name because the next-of-kin had not yet been notified.

The drowned man, 21, went swimming from a pontoon boat on the lake Sept. 28. A group of 13 friends and family heard the swimmer call for help at about 5:30 p.m. The drowned man's brother was swimming at the same time, but the drowned man disappeared beneath the water before the brother could locate him, according to the West Bloomfield Fire Department.

Those on the boat ranged in age from adults to small children, according to the Fire Department, and it is believed that no one had a cell phone on the boat, said Fire Capt. Joe Slawek, so they went ashore to call 911.

Getting to shore to report the incident took about 15 minutes, according to Slawek.

The West Bloomfield Fire Department responded with the 13-foot Seawolf rescue boat that the department purchased this summer on behalf of the Tri-City Fire Board. A civilian volunteer also provided a boat to carry four rescue personnel, Slawek said.

"We provide surface support," said Slawek.

"That effort was performed while dive team members from the sheriff's department responded from throughout the county," he said.

The Fire Department does not have its own divers.

After 90 minutes of rescue operations, the incident's status changed to a recovery effort.

Marine divers searched below the surface after dark and used two types of side-scan sonar. Personnel ceased searching at 10 p.m. Sept. 28, with the operation to resume the following morning.

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Slawek said that conflicting witness accounts about the man's last-seen position hindered the search. The last-seen point is crucial to determine the search area and where divers enter the water.

"There were numerous accounts from witnesses probably 100 yards apart or more that made location difficult," Slawek said.

Apparently, when the swimmers went in the lake, a gust of wind caused the pontoon boat to drift away.

"And that may have contributed to the differing accounts of the actual location," said Slawek.

"No floatation devices were being used," he reported.

Asked why the man drowned, Slawek said, "I don't have any definitive answer on that."

He said that in similar incidents, swimmers push the limits of their abilities. Sometimes unfamiliarity with the lake is a factor, and the lake's depth at the point of the incident — reportedly 90 feet — might be a contributing factor.

The drowned man was from Africa, according to the Fire Department. He was visiting his brother on Rue Du Lac, on the north side of Pontiac Trail, east of Halsted.

The lake is approximately 378 acres and the Fire Department reported that the search area was 200 yards from shore. The operations site started on Rue Du Lac, but moved to Shore Drive on the north side of the lake in the City of Orchard Lake Village to provide closer access to the search area.

This is the only drowning death in the township this year. This past April 7, Keego Harbor deployed its marine patrol boat to rescue two fishermen on Sylvan Lake. The fishermen survived, and the incident precipitated the purchase of the Seawolf.

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