

You don't have to wear an orange stripe...

to be a Lifesaver

Story by PA3 Barbara Patton, PADET New York

On the icy fringes of the North Atlantic, a massive cruise ship glides westward across a quiet sea during its maiden voyage to New York Harbor. The vessel is an engineering marvel; it's stronger and faster than anything that ever came before. As the ship effortlessly slips through the water, an iceberg violently rakes the hull, cutting a jagged scar through the 'unsinkable' RMS Titanic.

It's a well-known story, but this tragedy led to the creation of a much lesser-known program that has saved many thousand more lives than were lost on the Titanic.

The crew of the steel bohemoth fired flares high into the sky —

flaming red arcs observed from the deck of the Californian, another large vessel 19 miles north of the Titanic. The Californian's captain, Stanley Lord, was notified by his crew of the sighting, but it was quickly dismissed as a celebration aboard the liner. The captain had no idea 1,517 people were about to die.

A plan was created to identify other vessels in the vicinity of a ship in distress that might be able to help in a situation just like this. The idea remained in limbo until the dawn of computer technology when the Coast Guard and commercial shipping representatives formulated the concept of the Atlantic Merchant Vessel Reporting System.

AMVER went into affect July 18, 1958.

Today the program spans the globe and is no longer limited to the Atlantic Ocean. Its formal name was changed to Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue System to reflect this, but mariners still know it as AMVER.

Thousands of ships are available for AMVER rescues every day and hundreds of lives are saved each year. With less than twenty dedicated, full-time employees, AMVER coordinated the rescues of 450 people in 2007. When an AMVER request comes in, they identify nearby ships and select the ones that are the most capable to assist, depending on the situation

→ **QUICK STEP** Crewmembers from the motor vessel Mighty Servant I rescue the crew of a disabled sailboat approximately 365 miles north of Bermuda May 24, 2007.

Photo courtesy of AMVER





Photo courtesy of AMVER

according to Benjamin Strong, director of AMVER Maritime Relations.

As coordinators of the program prepare to celebrate its golden anniversary in 2008, they are reminded of the lives saved because of the program.

"It's a humbling experience. I only sit a desk," said Strong. "All these mariners risk their lives to help others."

AMVER frequently awards vessels for participation and for the rescues they perform, but the greatest reward is the thanks of the fellow mariners they have saved.

Harry LeBlanc and four other crewmembers were rescued by an AMVER participant while transporting a 45-foot boat to the Caribbean from Salem, Mass., in 2007. They were 1,400 miles into the trip when the rudder completely sheered off the stern, said LeBlanc. Sitting in 10 to 15 foot seas in the middle of the night, the weather looked like it was only going to get worse.

"We checked the weather model and found that we had several low pressure systems around that had the potential to blow up into some big storms," said LeBlanc.

After contacting the Coast Guard, an AMVER participant was located 70 miles away and was on scene by daybreak.

"We were expecting something a little smaller," LeBlanc said with a chuckle. Their rescuer happened to be the gigantic tanker Atlantic Prosperity.

The crew of the Japanese ship threw their cargo nets overboard and told them to jump in said LeBlanc.

"That was the scariest part. If you missed the net you hit the ocean and there was no way they could recover you."

LeBlanc said that the incident has made him more aware of maritime safety and that he didn't know anything about AMVER before it happened.

"I recommend anyone operating a commercial vessel to join because you never know when you might be able to help someone out," said LeBlanc. "If it weren't for the program, I don't know if I would be here."


He's not the only one. 



Photo courtesy of AMVER

↑ **CHARTING HISTORY** Navy watchstanders at the Automated Mutual-Assistance Vessel Rescue center plot vessel movements across the North Atlantic circa 1960.

← **RAG DOLL** A sailboat in heavy seas 645 miles off the coast of Virginia awaits rescue from the vessel Anthemis Nov. 10, 2006.

