

Three months
after they
were trapped
underwater,
two police
divers thank
their rescuers



Coast Guard helicopter pilot Melissa Buckley is greeted by Detective Peter Ellsworth in Milford on Friday. She and other helicopter crew members were thanked for their part in rescuing two Milford police divers.

Thanks for life

Milford ceremony acknowledges divers' rescuers

By ANGELA PASCOPELLA
Staff writer

Near-death for Milford Police Detective Peter Ellsworth left him loving life in a way that is hard to put into words. "You really do appreciate life," Ellsworth said Friday after shaking hands with the men and women of the U.S. Coast Guard who helped save him and his partner, Sgt. Gerald Butler, after a diving mishap last June.

"You realize what you take for granted," added Ellsworth, who was clinically dead for 10 minutes but made a full, miraculous recovery. "People breeze through a day without even thinking about what they did."

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— Detective Peter
Ellsworth



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Rescued divers join in tributes to Coast Guard

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But since death stared him in the face three months ago, 70 feet deep in Long Island Sound, Ellsworth has had a new chance to appreciate the little things — like flowers, friends and family.

But as scary as the mishap was, Ellsworth said Friday that he never feared he would die. "I was just thinking about getting out," Ellsworth said with a smile.

Ellsworth, dressed in plainclothes, and Butler, dressed in uniform, stood near their wives, silent but moved on the grassy outfield at Daniel S. Wasson field on West Main Street.

The short ceremony included fellow police officers, dive team members, and family members.

It began with the roar of an orange U.S. Coast Guard helicopter, the same Brooklyn-based helicopter that plucked Butler from the water.

Mayor Frederick L. Lisman and Chief Thomas Haherty thanked and gave awards to 14 members of the U.S. Coast Guard Group Long Island Sound for their help in bringing their officers home to safety.

It was from this field that a LifeStar helicopter picked up Ellsworth in June and flew him to Norwalk Hospital. The mayor and police chief recalled the intense but coordinated rescue effort, involving 163 people.

"Everyone did exactly what they were trained to do," said Lisman, who gave out proclamations and Extraordinary Life Saving awards. "And the city of Milford will be forever grateful."

Ellsworth and Butler later talked about their appreciation. "Obviously it's a very emotional day for Gerry and myself," Ellsworth said. "The Coast Guard did an excellent job. Fortunately they did their job so well or we wouldn't be standing here today."

And Ellsworth's wife, Lisa, who softly rubbed his back during the ceremony, explained her heartfelt thanks.

"My life was saved that day too," Lisa Ellsworth said later with a big smile. "When I saw him [in the hospital] I knew he would make it."

June 18, 1997. It was one of those cloudy, windy days that feels more like April. And it was one of those rare days when normally calm and confident officers turn frantic and scared.

The initial report was that two of their own were feared drowned. Ellsworth, an 18-year department veteran, and Butler, a 12-year-department veteran, were 70 feet under Long Island Sound, on a routine diving expedition with the Police Dive Team.

Shortly before noon, Ellsworth's fin strap tangled in a safety line. Butler cut any line he could to untangle him. But Butler ran out of air in his tank and popped to the surface, gasping for help.

Officer James Garfield made a distress call from the police boat to the Coast Guard, frantically telling them one of their officers was drowning. Meanwhile, the Milford fire boat was dispatched to help.

From New Haven's office, Petty Officer Kurt Hartman coordinated the rescue effort and sent a Coast Guard boat from New Haven and a helicopter from Brooklyn. "You can tell right off the bat from the tone of his [Garfield's] voice that this was serious," Hartman said before the ceremony.

Meanwhile, Police Sgt. Raymond Swift Jr., supervising officer at the time, jumped in the water, found Ellsworth, who had already run out of air, and untangled him. Ellsworth wasn't breathing and had no pulse.

Coast Guard officers and officials agreed that the elaborate ceremony of thanks from the city was a first for them. But they also said that the mishap was among the most serious accidents they ever experienced.

"We see this stuff all the time incidents where people don't make it," said Petty Officer Michael Forand. "It's a miracle [Ellsworth] made such a fast and full recovery."

Ellsworth was taken from the Sound by the Milford fire boat to shore. Then he was taken to Milford Hospital, and later flown to Norwalk Hospital.

The helicopter crew, including Lt. Melissa Buckley, Commander Jeff Pettit, Chief Petty Officer Eric Salls, and Petty Officer Ronny German, helped transfer Butler, who was conscious and walking, from the Coast Guard boat into a basket and then hoist him into the helicopter.

They flew Butler immediately to Norwalk Hospital for treatment in the hyperbaric chamber for decompression sickness after he surfaced too quickly.

"There was a certain sense of priority," said Buckley, the helicopter pilot. "We needed to get there as quickly as we could. Usually on these calls someone's life is on the line and we have to get there quickly to get them to a hospital."

"We were just glad we could help," she said with a shrug of her shoulder.

Commander Peter Mitchell, who received a proclamation, said timing was vital — and the boat responded within three minutes to the scene, as opposed to the standard 30 minutes it might take. "It was pretty amazing. You can tell they were working hard."