

## For want of a station . . .

**For the Kommetjie NSRI team that operates from a single garage with their equipment and vehicles split over a 6 km radius, it seems that red tape can be as treacherous as the Atlantic Ocean itself. By Les Aupiais**

The sea is deceptively calm off the Kommetjie coastline. Swells roll in over the kelp beds and only the experienced know how to navigate the few clear and narrow channels. Currents are treacherous and every now and then, a wave as high as two metres will catch the fishermen with their nets weighted down with crayfish. To maximise their quota, the small craft carry five men who mostly shy away from wearing life jackets. Their fathers and grandfathers fished without them, and tradition dies hard in these parts. The 'rogue' wave flips the boat within seconds and unless the men are able to hang on to a buoy or the upturned hull, the weight of their boots and warm gear will pull them under the icy Atlantic water. Adrenalin pumps as the fishermen's hearts race in panic. Hypothermia sets in fast. On land, accident victims have the 'golden hour' to be saved from death by paramedics. The Atlantic is less generous and NSRI volunteers have a precious 12 minutes to respond and save lives.

'It's the perfect recipe for a disaster' says station commander Ian Klopper. 'If the fishermen are able to send up a flare, and it's sighted - or someone actually sees the capsized craft, a call is routed via our emergency number and Port control, and then we are called.'

So far, so good.

For NSRI teams with a boathouse, station and full facilities within 100 metres of the high tide mark and right near a slipway, rescue craft and the volunteers can be launched within minutes. But for the past 13 years, Kommetjie NSRI volunteers have fought to save life and property - shark attack victims, fishermen washed into powerful currents, grounded vessels, capsized boats, dealt with beached whales and divers in distress - with their hands firmly tied. They operate from a single garage in Kommetjie at the end of an access road often clogged by long lines of vehicles and boats queuing for their turn to take to sea off the slipway. The garage has a single electrical outlet, one overhead light bulb, no toilet or shower facilities and is far too small for their two boats, quad bike and Rescue Runner, which have to be housed six kilometres away. Their tractor is in Noordhoek. Split resources add critical minutes to their response and rescue time, extra minutes, which for drowning men will seem like hours. Survivors say that with no sense of immediate help, it is all too easy to think of simply letting go . . .

'Can you imagine what it's like,' says Ian, 'when we do arrive and people in the crowd comment about what took us so long.'

Local resident and avid recreational fisherman, Gary Froud, has experienced the problem first hand. 'We capsized our boat on a relatively calm Saturday morning about 800 meters off the lighthouse, five minutes from the launch slipway,' he says. "It took the NSRI 40 minutes to get to us. Fortunately there were a lot of boats in the vicinity and we weren't in the water too long. Had this happened in the afternoon when there are few boats at sea our situation would have been far worse."

"If the NSRI had a proper base it would reduce their response time and allow them to provide a better service to the community and save lives," he adds. "We all have to remember that the service is free and that it's manned by dedicated volunteers. If the station's not built here, they may consider focusing their efforts elsewhere."

Froud's point is critical. The small band of volunteers, men and women with their own jobs and families who have to strip to their underwear in cramped quarters, perform dangerous rescues, must then return freezing and wet to hose themselves down with cold water before they return home. 'The volunteers are fantastic' says Ian. 'And they're prepared to risk their lives but to be honest, it's becoming more difficult to attract volunteers to Kommetjie under these conditions. It's just not fair on them.'

Ian started as station commander 13 years ago. Two other commanders have held the position and now the job is back in Ian's court. His frustration though is not based on critical bystanders or a cold sluicing after a rescue, it's the red tape that has tangled the process of securing them a permanent home for over a decade.

In theory, Kommetjie NSRI need not spend one more season this way. After turning down a proposed move to Soetwater (a bay several kilometres away and deemed far too dangerous by local fishermen because of rocks and heavy wave conditions) they have been able to earmark suitable land and have approval from the local residents to build a well designed station just over 100m from the slipway.

The NSRI has drawn up plans. Environmental assessment impact studies have been done. There are financial donors in the wings. Provision has been made for the erection of municipal toilets adjoining the building for public use out of the NSRI's budget. With wheelchair access, the KRRA and local residents demanded. And a baby changing room they added. And provision for temporary toilets while the main structures were under construction was the next request.

Yes. Yes. And yes, the NSRI agreed.

But the toilets, much like those at the centre of the political fracas during the provincial elections earlier this year, appear to be at the centre of the Kommetjie problem.

They were designed to be part of the adjoining building but the council required them to be self standing entities. The draft plans were amended. Then the toilets had to be moved

further from the main building to create a narrow 'no-man's land.' The plans were amended. Then a home owner who discovered that the toilets would be only metres from his property boundary, lodged a complaint. Simple, said the NSRI team; we'll shift the toilets to a better position on the opposite side of the proposed station, near the main access road and with no dark alley behind them so that 'undesirables' would not take advantage of any obscured entrances.

It simply required the plans to be rotated on the concept diagram. Done. So surely proper plans could be drawn up and the project green-lighted?

Somewhere, somehow, the process has stalled. For no clear reason it appears, other than 'these things take time', the project has become as firmly tangled in red tape as a drowned body might do in kelp.

Ward councillor Alderman Felicity Anne Purchase comments: 'When I queried it [the green light for the station] last week [end may] the affidavits from the objectors were not yet signed and submitted. Once that is done the application will be fast tracked.'

Ian's chasing the paperwork and hopes fervently that this is the last paper hurdle to leap. Any further delay may cost lives; it's certainly costing money.

'One of my major problems is losing sponsorship' says Ian. 'Donors allocate funds in a particular financial year based on concrete plans and the deal sealed. If the i's aren't dotted and the t's crossed, we say goodbye to millions of rands.'

For those served by Station 26, the situation is even more dire. Over the years the volunteers have been called to over 100 operations. They've saved 18 lives, one within 30 minutes of opening the station. They've towed 21 boats to safety and assisted many more. They were there when Ikhan Tanda went down in 2001 when all 18 crew members were saved. They've assisted with three shark attacks. They are fit, pretty much fearless and put anyone in distress at sea first before their own families. They are not lawyers, accountants or clerks but right now it seems that it will need more paperwork than physical prowess to get the project rubber stamped.

Meanwhile there are few precious months left before November 14, the opening of the crayfish season. If the first sod is not turned very soon, Kommetjie NSRI faces another season of homelessness and uncertainty. For those subsistence fishermen who risk their lives to eke out a living, for divers just out for a handful of crayfish for the pot, or for anyone at the mercy of the Atlantic in these parts, it stacks the odds against them. It's now a race between time and red tape.