

# Chesapeake Paddler



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USCG's Mario Vittone speaks at Pier 7 photo by Maywin

## US Coast Guard Search and Rescue Swimmer Shares Advice on Staying Safe on the Water: Mario Vittone Speaks at CPA's Pier 7 Piracy

By Jenny Plummer-Welker

Mario Vittone, Chief Warrant Officer with the United States Coast Guard, was a guest speaker at Pier 7 on July 27, 2011. Mario, stationed in Portsmouth, VA, is a member of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association. A native of Bowie, Maryland, Mario has been on active duty with the USCG since 1991. In 1994, he graduated from the Helicopter Rescue Swimmer School and served as a rescue swimmer in three tours of duty in North Carolina and Louisiana before becoming an instructor and course developer at the Aviation Technical Training Center. Mario is a leading expert on immersion hypothermia, drowning, sea survival, and safety at sea. In 2007, he was named the Coast

Guard Active Duty Enlisted Person of the Year. He lectures extensively and his writing has appeared in numerous magazines, including *Yachting Magazine* and *Reader's Digest*.

CPA member and Pier 7 paddler Suzanne Farace invited Mario to a Wednesday night club gathering to paddle and speak about water safety and water rescues. She also organized dinner for a larger-than-normal group of kayakers at Pier 7. The early arrivals paddled with Mario up the South River. The evening was sunny and warm, a pleasant break from 95 degree + days. The group returned to the marina beach and the assembled set of picnic tables. There were over 45 people in attendance. A typical Pier 7 mid-summer gathering ranges from 20 to 30 people. The dinner spread included chicken, pizza, salads, snacks, and dessert, orchestrated by Suzanne, Marilyn Fisher, and Maryrose Whelley. Gail Addis quickly ordered two Ledo's pizzas when it became apparent that attendance exceeded expectations. The club motto is "We Paddle to Eat." After dinner Mario stood on the beach and talked to the group about his experiences and suggested how we can be even safer while kayaking.

Mario began his talk by sharing the story of his kayaking the length of the Chesapeake Bay from Elk Neck to Fort Story. He planned his trip using a check list. Two of the last items he checked off were buy a kayak and learn how to paddle.

Mario said he does not meet people like us because we're so safety conscious. With technological advances, such as GPS and EPIRBs, rescues are occurring faster. In the early 1980s Steven Callahan survived 76 days adrift in a life raft before being rescued. Now rescues are occurring within 247 minutes (4 hours, 7 minutes). Mario quoted Herman Melville's Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick*, 'I'll have no man on my boat who is not afraid of the whale.' Mario asked us, "Where did we go tonight?" "Up the South River," was not the answer he was seeking, nor was "We went kayaking". His answer: "We surrounded ourselves with something that will eventually suck the life out of you." We went out in a boat, "something that has been letting its owners down since recorded history," Mario observed.

"The difference between the people we go and get and those we don't get...can be traced back from a bad decision the captain made at the dock," Mario stated. Some things cannot be foreseen, like appendicitis. Others can be, like not taking insulin medication on the boat, even for a short, four-hour trip. In over fifteen years, Mario has "never seen a float plan worth looking at." He then described the float plan he prepared for his kayak trip down the Chesapeake Bay. He took photographs of his kayak, the top side, bottom side and what he was wearing. He listed his equipment, his medication and his physical condition.

Mario has spent over 2,000 hours looking for people at sea. The biggest problem kayakers have is how to get seen. He stated that day distress signals show up better than night flares. The hot smoke of an orange smoke signal is going to show up for a long time. Night

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*A Rescue Swimmer's View of Water Safety (Continued from page 1)*

vision goggles (NVGs) are standard equipment for USGC rescues. The hot smoke will show up in NVGs. Other active signals include flashlights. He carries two Pelican lights (eight bucks) on his PFD. A waving flashlight can turn the search plane toward you. He is not a great fan of laser flares. For getting seen, strobe lights are fine, they do not have to flash S.O.S. as most rescuers will come check out a strobe. Lights of any kind are fine. When using flares, wait until someone can see you before firing them. In rescue missions, the rescuers are running a pattern so wait until they are looking in your direction. When you fire flares, do not shoot at your rescuers! Even with known GPS coordinates, it is still difficult to find someone at sea. Passive signals include a rescue streamer, which is a piece of plastic that floats on the water's surface ([www.rescuestreamer.com](http://www.rescuestreamer.com)). One of the kayakers asked about dye. Mario replied, "Dye is great, depends upon the sea state." Its use is rare now, thus searchers are not looking for dye. One CPA member asked "what boat color shows up best on the water? According to British research, it is **hot pink**. What colors show up well other than hot pink? Canary yellow is good. International orange is a color people are trained to see. White is good only when the water is flat calm (white caps are white).

Mario asked us where the coldest water is, not including Alaska or the Great Lakes. Kiptopeke State Park, in Cape Charles, Virginia, ties with Woods Hole, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Mario was one of the swimmers filmed in **Cold Water Boot Camp** (copies are available for lending from the CPA Library). Mario was forthright, "I am a better swimmer than you are. I made it 29 minutes. The first ten minutes out of the water is terrible. The muscles shake. The doctor took the blanket off, 'Everything is fine. He's shaking. He's in pain.'" Mario explained people would become hypothermic in about an hour but rarely make it that long because they are not wearing floatation and drown from their muscles shutting down. He walked us through the four stages when a person is immersed in cold water and then rescued:

- Shock,
- Incapacitation,
- Hypothermia, and
- Post rescue collapse.

He said that immersion shock kills about 20 percent of victims. There is an involuntary reflex to gasp. "If that gasp happens under water, that's bad," Mario said. He advised, you "have to control your breathing for 60 seconds to two minutes." The next stage, incapacitation, can lead to swimming failure. You have about ten minutes of meaningful movement to get back in your kayak. You're shivering, you're losing the ability to move your fingers. "If you've got your floatation on, you've got a long time, an hour, before you become hypothermic," he explained. These stages can be summarized as 1-10-1: one minute to control your breathing, 10 minutes of effective movement, and one hour before hypothermia sets in.

Mario mentioned the HELP position is a natural position a person assumes in cold water (HELP – Heat Escape Lessening Position). He said he took the huddle position out of the rescue manual, explaining it was designed by the Navy for Navy pilots with eight inches of insulating material tucked under their arms. He advised, "You should tie yourselves together to make a larger target." Being out of the water is better than in the water. Water will take heat away from the body much quicker than air. He emphasized, "It's a dry suit not a warm suit." You need to wear insulation under it to stay warm.



**CWO Mario Vittone**

*photo by Ralph Heimlich*



**Instigator and chefs (Suzanne Farace, Brent Cogswell, Marilyn Fisher, and Maryrose Whelley photo by Maywin)**

Post rescue collapse happens when the cold blood in the extremities returns to the core too fast. "No one sits up in my helicopter until the doc says so," he said. He advised, "You don't rub someone." Have them lay down. Mario gave out copies of the National Water Safety Congress' video, **Beyond Boot Camp USA: Rescue, Recover, Rewarm**, issued in 2010. The video includes the effects of cold water immersion and effective techniques when working with a hypothermic victim. He advised us to watch the video so that we know how to handle a hypothermic person if we have to rescue someone. [Editors note: Both videos can be watched on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/user/WaterSafetyCongress> ]

Mario gave tips on what one should do if being rescued. "We don't train for everything. We don't train for every boat." Point your kayak toward the helicopter. Typically the swimmer comes down, since most people do not sit in the basket correctly. The person being rescued should be in the basket the long way, not

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*A Rescue Swimmer's View of Water Safety (Continued from page 4)*

sitting across the basket the short way with arms and legs hanging out. For rescues, Mario shared, "We'll always get the dog. Sometimes I wished we'd rescue the dog and leave the owners."

Mario showed us his standard safety equipment he always has with him: a magnesium spark making device and a waterproof cylinder match case with cotton balls soaked in Vaseline. The metal match and cotton balls soaked in Vaseline will light even when wet. Mario held up an instant shelter, a heavy, bright orange plastic road worker's trash bag. It can be cut to create a poncho. It will provide shelter to stay warm.

The Chesapeake Paddlers Association and Pier 7 paddlers appreciate Mario Vittone taking the time and traveling the distance to share his experience and thoughts on how kayakers can be safer while on the water.

Mario Vittone's website includes information of interest to kayakers and all who venture near the water:

[www.mariovittone.com](http://www.mariovittone.com). Mario has also agreed to help us revise our cold water safety brochure (see <http://www.cpakayaker.com/uploads/resources/Safety3fold.pdf>).

Pictures are <https://picasaweb.google.com/maywin123/Pier7MarioVittoneTalk?authkey=Gv1sRgCOjPu7mViLOSQQ>

and <https://picasaweb.google.com/102459087707170525949/MarioVittoneDayAtPier7>



Pier 7: We Paddle to Eat photo by Ralph Heimlich



## Operation Paddle Smart: Safety Through Identification

The Coast Guard is also promoting Operation Paddle Smart, a voluntary program created by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) to assist emergency personnel in identifying unregistered small boats (canoes, kayaks, and dinghies) with the use of waterproof, reflective, stickers which display the owner's name and basic contact information.

Whenever a boat is reported unattended or abandoned the USCG and rescue agencies must assume the operator is in distress and conduct an extensive search. With the use of vessel identification stickers from Operation Paddle Smart, officials can try to contact the owner and determine the best course of action.

Orange vessel ownership stickers are available through the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, visit their [website](http://www.uscgboating.org) and select "contact us". To watch a video produced about Operation Paddle Smart, [click here](http://www.uscgboating.org). Excerpted from the Maryland Water Trails e-Newsletter.

### *Confessions (Continued from page 5)*

wanted. What I didn't expect was to make an early turnaround following an OC 2 (dummy me) that had started earlier, and then hearing from a K-2 (Cyndi Janetzko and Leslie Roberts) that I'd turned early! Dam, there went that lead (and about a full minute in time) and I was soon following Cindi and Leslie. That was OK, as they gave me the incentive to keep going and we paced each other for the next 4 miles or so until the last turn in the river before the finish. I gave it a little more effort thinking of the cool spray from the fire truck spraying the waters in the finish area—and it was cool and enjoyable! So was the race. Thank you Cyndi! [http://www.nanticokriverfest.com/competition\\_canoe.html](http://www.nanticokriverfest.com/competition_canoe.html)

I've found that I'm not as much a social paddler as one who enjoys the exercise in a hard paddle and prefers the calmer waters over the rough (guess that's my rowing likes as well). With time, that may change, but the transition from a rowing single to a kayak and surf ski has been well worth it, I hope others will partake in the racing, as well. There are races out there locally many may not know about. Here is one site and the next race for me. Racing is fun—it really is. <http://www.delmarvakayak.net/>



## Inside our August 2011 issue:

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CWO Mario Vittone, U.S.C.G., enduring 29 minutes of 36 degree water (click to watch the video) ***Beyond Boot Camp USA: Rescue, Recover, Rewarm***

### The Chesapeake Paddler

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