

Into the booming surf

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Diving off Vineyard, vets seek unexploded bombs

By David Abel, Globe Staff | June 21, 2009

EDGARTOWN - The sun-bronzed man ambled toward the lapping waves, but unlike other visitors to this peaceful beach at the southeastern tip of Martha's Vineyard, Erik Toews was not preparing to luxuriate in the surf.

The Navy veteran slipped on a deep-sea mask, attached a long, oxygen-filled cord, and marched into the ocean to fish for something no tourist on this island would want to discover during an afternoon swim: bombs.

"It's a good day when we find warheads," Toews, 40, said after a recent dive, one of scores off the island's South Beach in search of explosives. "It makes us feel like we're getting something done."

Two years after a powerful storm opened a milewide breach along a nearby beach, the currents south of Martha's Vineyard have changed and given rise to swirling eddies and white-capped riptides. They have also unearthed the remnants of a bombing range the Navy operated here during World War II.

The rusted, conical-shaped rockets that have turned up sporadically for years were mostly thought of as historical curiosities until their numbers started to increase over the past year. Then dozens of rockets and a succession of larger munitions washed ashore, specifically, three live 100-pound bombs, each of which looked like a beached seal.

When the last one appeared in April on a beach in West Tisbury, local bomb squads used shaped charges to detonate the large bombs built to destroy tanks and buildings, sending an ominous echo heard more than a mile away and sparking dozens of calls to island authorities.

"The thing that worries us is that there's no rhyme or reason to where they're coming from, no forewarning for when they'll turn up," said Chris Kennedy, the island's regional director for the Trustees of Reservations, which oversees many local beaches. "People have a right to be concerned. These were some of the most sensitive explosive materials used in World War II munitions."

No one has been injured by any of the bombs, but Kennedy said there have been close calls. When a 100-pound bomb washed up near Wasque Point this year, one of Kennedy's colleagues thought it was sea junk and was about to toss it in the back of his pickup truck before he reported it.

"There but for the grace of God," Kennedy said. "We don't know what would have happened, had he picked it up."

Since April, with the tourist season rapidly approaching, the US Army Corps of Engineers has tapped into a large pool of money set aside by the Defense Department to clean up former defense sites.

With more than \$1 million, the Corps of Engineers has hired Toews and other veterans to comb the waters off Martha's Vineyard for the vintage weaponry, which they believe come from an aerial machine-gun and rocket range on South Beach. They believe that the larger bombs have probably drifted from another old naval target range on Nomans Land island, 3 miles southwest of the Vineyard.

Over the past few months, the divers have used high-tech sensors and other tools to search 58 acres up to 110 feet offshore along Cape Poge and South Beach, where as many as 10,000 people come on a weekend day during the summer, local beach officials say. They have at least 6 acres left and hope to finish by July 2, when school ends and tourists flock to the island.

In that time, they have found 124 MK-23 bombs, five MK-5 bombs, and nearly 2,000 pounds of other bomb parts off Cape Poge. Along South Beach, where the work continues, they have found about 115 similar bombs, many of them designed to destroy submarines. None of those weapons, nearly all covered in rust and barnacles, contained explosives or rocket propellant or posed any danger, aside from cuts to unsuspecting swimmers.

But the threat of an explosion is always there, making the work painstaking and tedious. The divers use waterproof magnetometers to detect metal buried in the ocean floor, and when they find it, they use a special pump to remove the surrounding sand.

Before they handle the bombs, they inspect them carefully, relying on a video feed to a trailer on the beach, where colleagues check to see whether the weapons have experienced high-speed flight or signs of impact. The divers do not touch the bombs until all agree that the old weapons appear inert.

"We don't take any chances," said Tom Rancich, chief executive of VRHabilis Co., the diving company doing the work. "They're not moved until we're sure."

Corps of Engineers officials say the search may have to be extended to other parts of the island, given the currents and the possibility many of the old bombs have drifted elsewhere.

For now, they are working with local officials to raise awareness of the potential danger. Warning signs have been posted in the area that say in bold type that "World War II munitions may be present" and advise visitors that the bombs "should be treated as live munitions that have the potential to detonate, causing serious injury or death."

"When it comes to munitions, you can never say they're 100 percent clear," said Carol Charette, the project manager overseeing the work for the Corps of Engineers. "There's never a guarantee that more won't show up. You clear the area as best as you can."

The stark language and persisting danger has rattled local officials, who are already coping with a dip in tourism as a result of the cold spring and the recession. The number of visitors traveling to Martha's Vineyard by ferry has dropped more than 3 percent during the first six months of this year, compared with last year, according to the Steamship Authority, which operates the ferries.

But local officials hope potential visitors will be reassured by all the work being done.

"I've been swimming off South Beach my whole life, and I will continue to swim there," said Pamela Dolby, town administrator of Edgartown. "The greater concern right now is the weather."

Nancy Gardella, executive director of the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce, said she has confidence in the response by local, state, and federal officials, and she thinks tourists will understand that the risks of the bombs are remote.

"Most people are pretty smart," she said. "They know folks are taking care of it."

On Friday afternoon, not far from where the divers were going about their work, Sara Herdman and her young family watched the waves crashing on shore.

The 33-year-old from Washington, D.C., and her young family have been coming to the Vineyard for years, braving the cold water despite reports of shark sightings and other threats. When she learned from a reporter what the divers were doing, she stopped to think about it. She looked at her baby, lying in her husband's arms. "It does give me pause," she said.

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