

COAST GUARD Compass

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A survivor's “thank you”

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Posted by: Christopher Lagan



Petty Officer 3rd Class John Opsal, a rescue swimmer at Coast Guard Air Station Atlantic City, N.J., poses for a picture with Eric Hopkins after being given a framed thank-you letter that Hopkins wrote him. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Jonathan Lindberg.

There is no question in Eric Hopkins' mind that he owes his life to two things: a personal [EPIRB](#) and the United States Coast Guard.



Rear Adm. William "Dean" Lee, commander of the 5th District, holds up an Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon. A 406 EPIRB was credited with helping Coast Guard rescuers find Hopkins when his boat sank off the coast of Atlantic City. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Jonathan Lindberg.

"It is rare that we get an opportunity to come together as a team, as a team of lifesavers that spans the whole spectrum, to meet somebody, one of our customers, who had it not been for you would not be standing here today," said [Rear Adm. William "Dean" Lee, 5th District](#) Commander, in introducing Hopkins to an audience made up of Coast Guard members from throughout the 5th District who played a role in the rescue mission.

"His 406 EPIRB enabled the command center to vector the boats and the helicopter directly to the debris field that we found there. Without this device, we eventually would have found the debris, but it would have been too late. It would have been far too late."

Yesterday, Hopkins was afforded the [opportunity to meet the men and women who saved his life](#) when the vessel Sea Wolf broke apart and sank seven miles off the coast of Atlantic City. During the ceremony, he read aloud the letter he sent to Petty Officer 3rd Class John Opsal, the [rescue swimmer](#) who pulled Hopkins out of the water on December 23, 2010.

"I think this has got to be the hardest letter I've ever written," read Hopkins. "How can I ever express my gratitude to you and your crew for saving my life? I wish I was rich; I would pay off the mortgages on your homes. Sadly, I'm not rich. All I can do is sincerely say thank you."



Hopkins holds up a plaque from his rescuers that includes: "Thirteen command center hours - So many dollars. Six 47-foot motor lifeboat hours - More dollars. Five MH-65C helicopter hours - Even more dollars. The simple joy of saving your life - Priceless. Here's to buying toothbrushes! From your friends at the 5th Coast Guard District and Air Station Atlantic City." U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Jonathan Lindberg.

For Opsal, it was quite possibly the second most memorable day in his young Coast Guard career. The Sea Wolf case and rescue of Hopkins were both firsts for the unassuming petty officer. Hopkins presented Opsal with a framed copy of the thank you letter he wrote after his life was saved.

"I will keep it as my first case and first legitimate life saved," said Opsal.

And, while the reunion between rescue swimmer and survivor was certainly one of the most touching moments of the ceremony, the event was really about recognizing all of the players who had a role in the mission.

"I could not be prouder of all of you – from the wrench turners to the [SKs](#) who fill out the paperwork and requisitions for the parts to the boat crews to the air crews to the rescue swimmer who is at the very pointy end of the spear and went down there and laid hands on Mr. Hopkins and saved him from the certain death of that cold, cruel Atlantic Ocean," said Lee, putting the day's event into perspective. "You need to be proud of yourselves. You need to be proud of the organization that you serve and that you represent and what we exist to do. Today, it's days like this that makes it all worthwhile."

Click [here](#) to watch video of the reunion ceremony.