

Turning the Tide: United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps in Rhode Island in the 1900s

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

In 1929, **DR. MANCER W. TALCOTT**, Superintendent of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps (USVLSC), Rhode Island Department, comprised of over 200 members, presented its 24th annual report to the General Assembly.

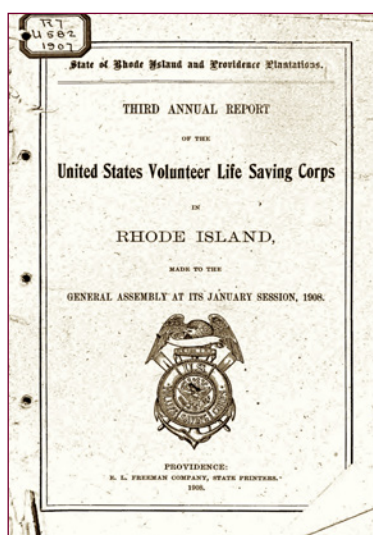


Figure 1. The third annual report of the United States Volunteer Life Saving Corps (USVLSC), Rhode Island, in 1908, features the group's insignia.

"dangerous bathing beaches and watering places." [See **Figure 4.**] Appropriated salaries were for two men known as quartermasters, who spent their entire time "inspecting, replacing, repairing, painting and splicing, and all the small detail work," to maintain the boats, stations, and equipment. The report gave the statistics for the prior year:

- 115 rescues, 37 of which required resuscitation
- 1,100 life buoys and lines at most of the dangerous places in Rhode Island
- 425 medicine chests; over 6,500 people assisted by these chests

He described the Corps, a supplement to the federal U.S. Life Saving Service, as "a humane organization whose 2,000 members voluntarily patrol beaches and dangerous places because they are interested in this work of saving human life. Every member is an expert swimmer and has to pass a rigid examination of rescuing a person from drowning, resuscitation, and First Aid." [See **Figures 1–3.**]

Funding by the State amounted to about \$4,000 per year, spent on the purchase of new surf boats and life buoys, and for medicine and First Aid supplies at the Corps' stations, located throughout the state's



"The doctor, on the other hand, who had probably had very little experience in resuscitation from drowning, thought that there was no possible hope of resuscitating this man, and so declared the case hopeless.

Figure 3. Rescue crew returning from a practice drill in 1927.



Figure 2. USVLSC boat, child sitting inside, and lifeguard at a Rhode Island beach in 1927.

Rescue/First Aid Demonstrations

Seasonal demonstrations were given in Rhode Island and other states with USVLSC divisions. The Corps also taught rescue and resuscitation methods to the Boy Scouts, at the YMCA, and at summer and church camps. The report stated that in 1928 over 50,000 people watched members "demonstrate the safest methods of rescue, including how to break away from a drowning man's death grip," and the best method of resuscitation, called the Schafer or prone-pressure method.

It was the standard method of artificial respiration, preceding mouth-to-mouth resuscitation in mid-century America. Introduced in 1903 by English physiologist **SIR EDWARD ALBERT SHARPEY-SCHAFER**, it involved placing the patient or drowning victim on his stomach and applying pressure to the lower part of the ribs [See **Figure 5.**]

Boy Directs Resuscitation after Doctor Declares Man Dead

One rescue story stands out in the 1929 annual report – that of a boy who challenged a physician on the beach. As Dr. Talcott recounted it: " 'He is dead, now run along and get out of the way.' That is what a doctor said on one of the Rhode Island beaches when a small boy asked if this doctor was not going to work more on a drowning victim. The boy, kidlike, was inquisitive and wanted to know why a man who had been brought ashore from the surf within fifteen minutes from the time he had gone underwater could not be revived.



Figure 4. Many accidents occurred at the canoe places, the report stated.
[SOURCE OF FIGURES 1-4: SECRETARY OF STATE, RI, DIGITAL STATE ARCHIVES]

"The boy, when he found out positively that the doctor was not going to do anything more, turned to two women and asked them if they would work on the drowned man. He told them what to do, because, as the kid said, he was not strong enough to do it alone. The boy told these two women how to lift the drowned man with their hands under his stomach and how to place him over their knee, and then he told them to hit hard between the two shoulders so as to get the water out of his air passages. And when they did this, the first thing that happened was he threw a large wad of chewing gum, which had got stuck in his throat, right out on the sand.

"They then laid him on the beach and the lad explained to them how to straddle the apparently drowned man and how to lift on the lower ribs and pressing in and then pressing downward and forward to work successfully the Schaefer resuscitation. And after a little over a half hour's work, this drowned man, who had been pronounced dead by a physician, showed definite signs of life and within a very short time after that was starting to breathe with regularity...the man was brought absolutely around safely and is alive today."

Dr. Talcott, in an aside, related that "in a demonstration [of the Schaefer method] which I was requested to give before over one thousand physicians and surgeons, a doctor came to me and said, 'If had only known what you were demonstrating ten years ago, I would have had a wife and three children alive today.'"

Rescue Medals Awarded

Dr. Talcott highlighted medals awarded by the Corps, "which are only given to the exceptional rescues." In 1928, at the West Elmwood Club House, medals were presented by Mayor **JAMES DUNNE** of Providence.

One was awarded to **ROBERT MCADAMS**, 13, who rescued a boy, James Rose. "Young McAdams was playing on the shore when somebody called to him that a boy was drowning. He ran up the shore and without stopping to take off any of his clothing, he dove in, but as he got to the boy, the boy grabbed him around the neck [the death grip] and, after giving him a very hard struggle, young McAdams broke away from him and then towed him to the shore."

Five men were also given medals for rescuing three boys who had fallen through the ice in mid-winter at Mashapaug Pond. Dr. Talcott described is as "one of the most dangerous rescues that had been made around the city of Providence in a good many years. There was no boat or any life-saving apparatus, and it was only after the most heartbreaking struggle and after all the men making the rescue had themselves gone under the ice several times, that the boys were finally brought to shore."

The Corps volunteers of all ages were truly heroes who turned the tide for drowning victims and their families. ❖

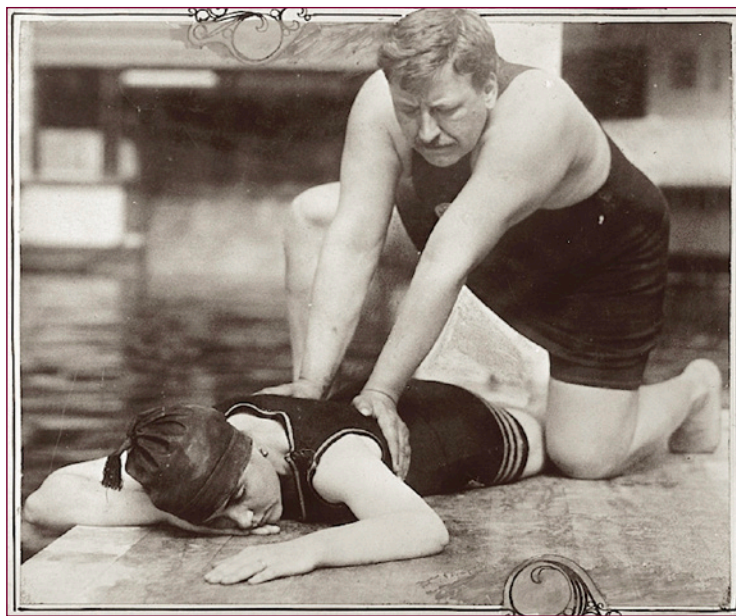


Figure 5. Wilbert E. Longfellow of Rhode Island, a leader in the USVLSC and later the Red Cross, demonstrating how to revive a near drowned person in 1919, using the Schaefer method of resuscitation. [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

For the above mentioned annual reports, visit:

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