

## **An Unexpected Wilderness in a Sea of Holy Pilgrims**

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Drowning is a serious and neglected public health threat claiming the lives of more than 372 000 people a year worldwide; 40 people every hour of every day. More than 90% of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. Brazil has one of the largest aquatic recreational areas in the world leading to a very high risk exposure year around and one of highest rates of drowning deaths – 6,000 people in 2013. Our coastline has more than 8,000 km and navigable rivers make up to 35,000 km. This, coupled with the pleasant climate, makes drowning as one of the major risk on wilderness travelers who venture into areas covered by the lifeguards. In fact, 75% of all drowning deaths in Brazil occur in rivers, lakes and dams. Though many of these are sports related adventurers, they are more often just local or tourists looking to cool off from the heat or who find themselves in danger aboard ferries or recreational boats.

It is no secret that aquatic wilderness sports are included in the top list of risky practices. The competitive nature of adventure sports and the wilderness lifestyle often place participants in situations that may be beyond their skills or abilities. Drowning may be caused by inability to self-extricate, acute injury, or medical illness. Difficult to access, remote environments and the distance from definitive care all increase the risk of death by drowning. Participants are often aware of the inherent risks and actively engage in safe practices to prevent these tragedies from occurring.

By contrast, most people consider recreational beaches and pools, staffed by trained and qualified lifeguards, to be relatively safe settings. The beaches of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil are often the intersection of the wilderness environment and a well organized pre-hospital emergency medical services environment. One of the unique aspects of the pre-hospital care in Brazil is that the Fire Department is actually a branch of the military, and the lifeguards are a branch of the Fire Department. The lifeguard stations in the beaches of Rio de Janeiro are run like military bases and are called Drowning Resuscitation Centres.

The guards along beaches frequently manage large crowds. From 1972 to 2002 the Fire Department of Rio de Janeiro - Lifeguard Service (CBMERJ) made approximately 166,000 rescues along the beaches and treated 8,500 victims in the Drowning Resuscitation Centres. The numbers are still being tabulated for the 2016 Summer Olympics, but another recent event tested the capacity of these elite guards.

On January 28, 2013, at the peak of the Brazilian summer, the wildly popular Pope Francis visited Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day

Pope Francis VISITING RIO DE JANEIRO - WORLD YOUTH DAY 2013



The planning for the papal visit took years and was scheduled to occur at a large rural area near the city. But 3 days of torrential rains transformed the venue into a large mud pit, making it impossible to host the massive crowds. The organizers made the tough, last minute decision to relocate the venue. The only place that could handle such a large crowd on short notice was the famous and idyllic Copacabana Beach. Immediately after the announcement the CBMERJ lifeguards began preparations to provide safety for the event, both on the land and in water. All the planning done with a few years in advance had to be modified just days before. Moving to Copacabana would completely change the scenery and risks. The weather was clearing, the surf was rough, the rip currents numerous, and the announcement led to a doubling of the projected to almost 3 million! Since the original venue was inland, there were no contingency plan for rescues along the beach or offshore. The CBEMRJ also had to provide peak staffing levels at all of the neighboring beaches, despite more than doubling the lifeguard coverage in Copacabana.

Over the course of the 2 day event, there were 2.5 million people along the 2.6 miles of coastline. The 130 lifeguards on duty performed 305 rescues in the pounding five foot surf. Twenty-seven speed boats, personal watercraft, and inflatable rescue

boats were used. A total of three ambulances and two helicopters served the massive event and only seven people required additional treatment at the Drowning Resuscitation Center. There were no deaths and no patients that required CPR.

Prevention efforts were paramount to avoiding catastrophe at this last minute mass gathering. Lifeguards, firefighters and volunteers guided the population to the egress routes, subway exits, and bus stops. Lifeguards at the beach whistled, signaled, and guided the pilgrims away from the water. Many of those in attendance had never seen the surf or been to the beach, and that was not the time for new adventures. It has been said that it was the prayers of the humble Pope Francis that prevented disaster. While that may be true, we'd like to think that he was thanking the lifeguards for help.

“God created the world, LIFE, and from that human beings.

Angels were sent to GUARD us.

Thus, the first angel to get in the water was called LIFEGUARD”

Szpilman 1997