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Investigating Drownings in Ireland

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An Garda Síochána

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Investigating Drownings in Ireland
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I was raised in Fethard On Sea, Co. Wexford. My father was a commercial fisherman and I had a childhood spent more on the water than on land. He was Area Officer for the Coast and Cliff Rescue Service which involved him in many sea tragedies around the Hook Peninsula. I assisted him as a boy during searches. He knows things about the sea that most others do not. I learned a great deal from him even today.

I enrolled in Swimming and Lifesaving Course run in Fethard by Irish Water Safety. I attended courses annually, which were taught in the sea as there was no swimming pool. Slowly I worked through all the practical examinations becoming a Lifesaving Instructor. At 18 yrs I was teaching and examining young people while becoming a very strong swimmer. I interviewed for a summer Job as a Beach Lifeguard in 1991 on a dangerous beach – Duncannon, Co. Wexford. I ended up getting the Beachguard-In-Charge job. That summer I assisted my father in a search for a very good friend I had just sat the Leaving Certificate Examination with 2 months previously. His father, uncle and 11 year old brother had all drowned off Slade close to the Harbour. This was my first exposure to a death where I was a personal friend of a victim. I was a lifeguard for 4 years being involved in some small rescues. These were more prevention than cure as I had learned to anticipate other people's behaviour. This experience was invaluable. I watched the Garda Underwater Unit search for and recover the body of a 10 year old boy. I was awestruck at how professional this group was and knew that this was what I wanted to do.

I joined An Garda Síochána in Sept 1994 and knew that I wanted to join the Garda Underwater Unit. I had to wait for my chance. In the Garda Training College we received basic swimming, lifesaving and first aid instruction. I was surprised at how many Gardaí could not swim. In 1998 I joined the Underwater Unit where I remained until 2003. I was involved in many search operations in every corner of Ireland. I was trained to an extremely high standard in Commercial/Police Diving. I was involved in several rescues while in the Unit - people jumping from bridges while we were on patrol to the rescue of 6 people in Lough Swilly in 2001.

In 2003 I returned to uniformed work in Waterford Garda Station where I entered the Club Diving Scene. I became an Instructor/Examiner with the Irish Underwater Council and branched out into the highly specialised world of Technical Diving. While working as a Garda on patrol around Waterford City, which has a wide River Suir flowing through it, there were many occasions when I had to utilise my skillset. The first rescue was a chronic alcoholic whom I found lying face up in 6 foot of water. Having jumped in and pulled him out I had to give mouth to mouth resuscitation. He survived but I ended up in hospital for a week with an infection. Another involved a very drunk suicidal person

who jumped in and I used a small boat to rescue him in the pitch black night. Over the next 13 years I was involved in several serious incidents when I went into automatic mode and rescued many from the River Suir. My boss used to affectionately refer to me as a Golden Retriever.

I was always able to respond very quickly to water incidents possibly from having a water based childhood. I learned that I was able to put into practice skills I had spent years learning and that it is important to be able to act very quickly and decisively, to think on the move, learning from every event.

From a Garda procedural point of view, there are several steps that must be taken when a deceased person is located in the water. These include liaising with family or friends of the deceased, assessing a scene, dealing with other emergency services, keeping a chain of evidence, dealing with the Coroner, working with the Garda Water Unit if there is any foul play suspected. Civilian search and rescue groups are used only when nothing is suspicious. The deceased has to undergo a Post Mortem examination. A lot of time is required to deal with each situation. It can take months to finalise a case.



Garda Dave Hearne has been involved in at least seven drowning rescues for which he has been the recipient of a number of awards including the Michael Heffernan Medal for Marine Gallantry in 2009. He was a member of the Garda Water Unit for some years.