



Heroic Acts Saves Lives

AFRAS (Association For Rescue At Sea) Honors C-PORT Members with Lifesaving Awards

AFRAS celebrated two C-PORT members with its prestigious lifesaving award at the 39th C-PORT Conference held January 26–28, 2026 at the Wyndham Lake Buena Vista Resort, Orlando, FL. The award was announced on Tuesday during the C-PORT Awards Banquet Gala.

Honored were Captain Michael Tucker, Big Water Cowboys/TowBoatU.S. Lake Texoma and Captain Zach Baxter, Estrada Marine Service/TowBoatU.S. Lake Lanier.

RADM James Olson, U.S. Coast Guard (Ret.), AFRAS Board member, was slated to present, but the winter storm made that impossible, grounding flights around the country. CAPT Matt Fine, Chief, Office of Shore Forces, USCG, was at the event and graciously agreed to present these lifesaving awards to the honorees.

RADM Olson sent his congratulations stating, “The Association for Rescue at Sea, AFRAS, promotes the importance of maritime safety with support and award recognition for outstanding rescues and assistance. AFRAS works with many maritime and aviation organizations in the United States and Internationally. AFRAS provides worldwide support and assistance to volunteer air and sea rescue services. As an AFRAS Board member, I am proud to congratulate your two Association for Rescue At Sea award winners this year, Captain Zach Baxter from Estrada Marine Service, and Captain Michael Tucker from Big Water Cowboys, and his deckhand Elie Karam.”

Tina Cardone, executive director of C-PORT commented, “Our association is thrilled to continue to have our members receive this high honor.” This award represents over a decade’s long relationship between C-PORT and AFRAS. In 2010, AFRAS had expressed a desire to establish a program, in cooperation with C-PORT, to annually recognize a deserving member of C-PORT that has shown exceptional skill and determination to save lives during a rescue incident in the maritime environment. The Award is to be conferred on an individual or group of individuals who perform exceptional acts in attempting to save life. Instances where the rescuer places their own life at risk are given highest consideration.

The remarkable stories of heroism:

Captain Michael Tucker and Deckhand Elie Karam:



What started as beautiful and sunny fun day on the lake with a father, his three children and two of their friends - six people in all - turned into a near tragedy as the weather turned, the wind picked up to 30-45 knots and waves increased to 5-7' swells. On July 8, 2025, TowBoatU.S. Lake Texoma dispatch received a call from Grayson County Sheriff's Office asking if they had a boat in the water because no other agencies did. The office informed the dispatcher of a “non-urgent situation” where a juvenile was driving a boat and couldn't get the boat turned around to pick up people in the water. Captain Michael Tucker stated they would head that way immediately. Reaching the dock and recognizing the sea state, Tucker grabbed deckhand Elie Karam and the two acted quickly. Knowing that seconds mattered with the worsening conditions, and the closest towboat was 30 minutes away, Tucker made the decision to take a rental pontoon boat from the marina.

They departed and surged through waves which had blown over 2 miles in the 13 minutes from the call. Tucker's seamanship skills were challenged that day, with the pontoon boat acting like a big kite on the water. They found the vessel with a juvenile that was approximately 14 years old by himself, frantic and crying. Tucker asked how many people were in the water and where? The boy pointed and said five. Tucker and Karam immediately headed on in that direction, riding the swells, and searching for anyone. They saw the first head bobbing and pulled up to find a young girl, approximately 13 years old, in the water with no life jacket. Holding the vessel as steady as possible, the girl was pulled from the water and was convinced her dad “didn't make it”.

Captain Tucker saw the next two people in the water, an 8-year-old wearing arm floaties holding up another boy,

around 10 years old, also without a life jacket positioned about 150' from the first survivor. Tucker navigated the boat closer and retrieved them. The three children huddled together on the boat, shaken and scared. Tucker asked where the others were, and the children said "the other girl was swimming to shore" which Tucker estimated was about 200 feet away into the waves.

Using his training, Tucker headed as rapidly as possible in the most likely direction the girl would have gone. He noticed a head going under the water and coming back up briefly. As he reached the girl, she said, "I can't do this anymore, I'm exhausted". Tucker prepped himself mentally to dive into the water after her but was able to successfully use an oar to grab the girl and drag her to the boarding ladder where Karam helped her onboard.

Once aboard, the situation felt grim as the survivors were sure the dad had drowned. Tucker offered calm reassurance and support, telling them they're brave, they're strong and everything was going to be ok, however he truly feared the worst. Off in the distance (about 300-400' from the previous survivor), Captain Tucker noticed a sailboat that had hove to and was attempting to throw a life ring but into the wind. Swiftly approaching the scene, Tucker saw a hand barely out of the water and slipping under the surface. It was an adult male fighting for survival. Karam immediately threw a life jacket, and the man was able to grab it and ultimately collapsed on it. He looked at Tucker and Karam and cried out "you saved my kids; you have all of them?" After giving him a moment to catch his breath, Tucker and Karam dragged him aboard. The mood shifted from grim and hopeless to rejoice and relief.

Tucker and Karam took the group back towards their boat and called dispatch to notify them that everyone was safely aboard. Once reaching the vessel, Tucker transferred the juvenile, who had feared the worst, onto the pontoon to be reunited with his family. The family grasped each other in joy and with tears of happiness. Everyone was taken back to shore and nobody needed medical attention.

Knowing the state of the survivors, Tucker said after the fact that "A few minutes later and it would have been a recovery not a rescue for at least two of the persons in the water...We're not heroes, just ready and able to answer a call to action fortunately with a little skill to back it up."

Cited: Displaying the characteristics and traits of a true lifesaver without regard for their own safety, Captain Michael Tucker, and Deckhand Elie Karam have brought great credit upon themselves, Big Water Cowboys, TowBoatU.S., and the entire marine assistance towing and salvage industry. Captain Tucker and Deckhand Karam are recognized for their situational awareness, judgement, and seamanship skills under perilous circumstances. Their quick decisive actions and calm demeanor under stressful circumstances, saved five lives that day.

Captain Zach Baxter:



marina earlier that day.

At approximately 18:50 on July 4, 2025, Captain Zach Baxter of Estrada Marine Service responded to what he thought was a typical fuel delivery. On arrival to the busiest cove on Lake Lanier, he delivered fuel to a vessel carrying seven people on board, including five children. After delivering the fuel, the boat wouldn't start. Captain Baxter began to diagnosis the problem, following his training by opening the engine hatch to check for issues. No fuel fumes or any other deterrent alarmed the captain, so they tried to start it again. The vessel still didn't start, and Baxter informed the boat owner that he would tow them back to their home marina. The owner of the boat reluctantly agreed to the tow and confided to Baxter that he may have put fuel in the water tank before leaving his home

marina earlier that day. With this information, Baxter left the engine hatch and other compartments open and readied the vessel for a tow. While under tow and without consulting Baxter, the vessel owner closed the hatch and tried to restart the boat creating an explosion. The engine hatch blew up into the air, and the vessel flames began to take over at the engine compartment. Instead of being concerned with his own safety, Captain Baxter immediately pulled the burning vessel towards him, asking the seven people on board to jump into the water. It's at this moment Baxter saw that the children were not wearing life jackets and they did not want to jump overboard. He knew he would have to act quickly to avoid a catastrophe.

Baxter immediately pulled his towboat close to the burning boat, and with children screaming, pulled all seven persons on to his towboat. With injuries present, he delivered them to EMTs swiftly and safely. One patient went to a local hospital, while one was airlifted to Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta for burns, and the remaining patients were transported to Grady by EMS.

The heroism didn't end there. Captain Baxter saw that the vessel that was now fully engulfed in flames was approaching a dock crowded with bystanders and boats. Baxter wedged his towboat between the dock and the burning vessel. He then trimmed one of his outboards up and began spraying the engulfed boat to keep the fire from spreading. Luckily, local firefighters arrived on scene quickly and were able to fight the remaining fire to keep everyone in the cove safe.

Cited: Displaying the characteristics and traits of a true lifesaver without regard for his own safety, Captain Zach Baxter has brought great credit upon himself, Estrada Marine Service, TowBoatU.S., and the entire marine assistance towing and salvage industry. Captain Baxter is recognized for his selfless actions, situational awareness, judgement, and seamanship skills under perilous circumstances, resulting in the effective rescue of seven persons who were onboard the burning vessel, as well as countless other bystanders and property at the dock.

Conference of Professional Operators for Response Towing, C-PORT, was founded in 1985 to act as a liaison between the marine assistance industry and public agencies and organizations involved with boating safety, marine assistance, marine salvage and other marine-related operations. Its mission is to represent, promote, protect, and defend its member companies through communication, relationship development, and education. Our members are dedicated to providing prompt, professional and timely assistance to all boaters and to actively partner and cooperate with local law enforcement and U.S. Coast Guard. They are professionals, dedicated to the growth and development of their respective businesses and committed to furthering the advancement of our waterways and the boating community. For more information, contact C-PORT at (954) 261-2012 or visit <https://cport.us>.

C-PORT (Conference of Professional Operators for Response Towing)
4251 NE 27th Avenue, Lighthouse Point, FL 33064
tcardone@cport.us 954-261-2012