



Larry Achen, left, and Owen Miller prepare the frame for firefighters' float in the Begonia Festival parade. Kurt Ellison

## 'Battle of floats' in Capitola

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By JENNIFER SASSEEN  
STAFF WRITER

Central Fire District firefighters are getting ready for a "Battle at Sea" tomorrow in Capitola.

That's the name of the fire district's entry in the 36th annual Capitola Begonia Festival's Nautical Parade of floats down Soquel Creek. Theme of the festival this year is "Celebration of the Sea."

The firefighters' version of a sea celebration is an old-fashioned battle between a Spanish galleon and a pirate ship. The ships will actually fire cannons at each other several times before the galleon gets the better of the motley pirate crew and sinks its ship.

At least, that's the plan envisioned by firefighter Owen Miller, who came up with the idea for a sea battle. If there's one thing he's learned from working on floats the two previous years, he said, it's that things don't always go according to plan when it comes to the Begonia Festival.

Take the fire district's first float entry in 1987, "Jason and the Argonauts." Everything was going smoothly until a few hours before the parade. Firefighters, friends and relatives were busy attaching begonias to their Viking-ship float while children played on it.

"All of a sudden, we heard this big crack," Miller said.

The weight of the begonias — which are heavy because they consist mostly of water — in conjunction with the children's roughhousing had caused one of the main supports to crack, he said, "and it was hell getting it back together again."

Last year's entry was a smoke-blowing, water-squirting fire truck complete with sirens and bells. Firefighters' parade strategy included rescuing a damsel in distress from a burning canoe.

Miller had picked out an appropriate song called "I Need a Hero" to play during the rescue, but someone flipped the tape over and another song played instead. The song turned out to be OK, Miller said, but the mishap is another example of things that go wrong despite the best-laid plans.

No amount of planning can avert a last-minute rush to get the float together in time for the parade, Miller said.

"It's the type of thing where it always comes down to that the last three days are just absolutely nuts," he said, "and there's no way to avoid it."

Firefighter Larry Achen, the craftsman behind the fire district's floats, said there are times he wonders why he ever got involved, but the results are worth it.

"Just entertaining the crowd on shore — that's what it's all about," he said. "And having a good time."

Each year, the men said, Miller has come up with the idea for the fire district's float and Achen has built it, with the help of some other firefighters and the garage, tools and technical advice of neighbor Peter Hubback.

Achen constructed the ships' frameworks this year entirely out of rebar, to which chicken wire will be attached to hold the begonias. It's the first time he knows of that any float has been built entirely of rebar, he said, but the result is a framework that's lighter than wood and should float better.

He and Miller estimated 18,000 begonias would be needed to cover the ships. Miller and a group of volunteers, including several firefighters, got up early this morning and headed down to the Brown Bulb Ranch's begonia fields near Marina to pick the flowers.

Crews will work until midnight attaching flowers to the floats, then return early tomorrow to finish, Miller said. Plans are to cover the Spanish galleon with mostly red begonias, using white ones as trim and orange for the pirate ship.

Miller will captain the galleon.

He said he had hoped to sink Achen aboard the pirate ship, but Achen has to work, so he'll have to settle for another firefighter.

The fight between the ships isn't the only battle Miller is planning on winning. Although the fire district's floats have won awards the past two years, the 302 Cherry Street Gang has taken the most coveted prize, the grand sweepstakes award.

"Cherry Street has won it the last two years in a row," Miller said, "and we plan to do something about that this year."

The Nautical Parade begins at 2 p.m. Other groups and their float entries are the 302 Cherry Street Gang, "Kingfish"; No Line Down, "Yellow Submarine"; Avila Construction, "Sunken Treasure with Skindiver"; Day Valley Pudding Society, "A Hex on Vanilla," described as a pudding tanker; St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, "Moses and the Red Sea";

City of Capitola, "The Capitola Wharf"; Golinos and Friends, "A Whale"; Bay Photo, "King Neptune and His Mermaids"; the Elks Lodge, "The Mayflower: Dream of Americanism"; Orchard Supply Hardware, "Epicurean Delight"; Mervyn's Department Store, "Mervmaids"; Capitola Arts Commission, "Breezin'," depicting a windsurfer.