Gander Robotics Closes $1.1M Pre-Seed Round to Build Autonomous Search and Rescue Robots

Navy veteran and MIT entrepreneur launches defense robotics company to tackle the man-overboard crisis and combat its 72% fatality rate at sea

CAMBRIDGE, MA, UNITED STATES, April 2, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Gander Robotics, a defense and dual-use robotics company developing autonomous rescue systems for maritime operations, today announced it has closed a $1.1 million pre-seed funding round to help mitigate the maritime industry's “man-overboard” crisis. The round was co-led by Impellent Ventures and Underscore VC, marking Gander's official launch. The company traces its origins to MIT Sloan, where Founder Michael Autery's deep domain expertise and 15 years of Naval experience and Co-Founder Lael Ayala’s robotics expertise quickly attracted the attention of his investors, advisors, and defense stakeholders.

> “Every seafarer knows the fear of a man-overboard call. I built this company because this problem hits home, and I know we can do better. Our tech is a fundamentally new approach to saving lives at sea”
>
> *Michael Autery, CEO & Founder of Gander Robotics*

The man-overboard problem is one of the most urgent and underserved challenges in maritime safety. In the U.S. Navy, the survival rate for personnel who fall overboard is just 28 percent. In the cruise line industry, it drops to 17 percent. Current rescue protocols depend on human reaction time, visual searches, and manual deployment of rescue swimmers, a process measured in minutes or hours when every second counts.

Gander Robotics’ flagship product, the Autonomous Rescue Swimmer (ARS), is designed to change that equation. The ARS is hand-tossed in a man-overboard event, uses AI-powered sonar to locate victims even in low-visibility and rough-water conditions, and delivers a three-part rescue package: an auto-inflating flotation device to secure the victim, a high-visibility flare for position signaling, and an RF transmitter for continuous location tracking. The system buys precious minutes for human rescue teams, transforming desperate searches into successful recoveries.

"Michael Autery is exactly the kind of founder we look for - a rare combination of deep domain expertise, mission-driven conviction, and the intellectual horsepower to build something that truly matters," said Phil Beauregard, Partner at Impellent Ventures. "The military's non-kinetic challenges – search and rescue, logistics, safety – are among the most underfunded and under-innovated areas in the entire defense ecosystem. Gander is going directly at that gap, and the reception from the Coast Guard and Navy has made clear that the need is real and urgent. We believe this is just the beginning of a company that will define what thoughtful, mission-aligned defense technology looks like for the next decade."

Gander Robotics Founder, Michael Autery, holding both the grand prize and Audience Choice Award checks from the MIT $100k Pitch competition

"We see Gander Robotics as a platform for maritime autonomy that starts with rescue but extends to the entire 'non-kinetic' defense space," said Lily Lyman, Managing Partner at Underscore VC. "Michael is a Navy veteran and ocean engineer who understands this problem at a visceral level. Lael is a brilliant Harvard roboticist and engineer. That background, combined with a technical approach that no one else in the market is pursuing, is exactly the kind of founder and mission we look for. Gander Robotics is solving a real, life-or-death problem with a clear technical edge."

Gander Robotics was born at MIT Sloan, where Michael Autery, P.E. — a U.S. Navy veteran, ocean engineer, and father — turned 15 years of maritime experience into a venture backed company that swept MIT's most prestigious entrepreneurship competition, The MIT 100K Pitch Competition. Autery, a 37-year-old husband and father of three, represents a different kind of founder story: one driven not by the typical Silicon Valley playbook but by a career spent serving his country and an intimate understanding of the risks service members face day in and day out.

The pre-seed capital will accelerate prototype development and testing, supporting Gander's active engagements across defense, government, and commercial maritime sectors, particularly with cruise line operators facing the same life threatening challenge.

"Every sailor and mariner in the world knows the fear of a man-overboard call," said Michael Autery, CEO and Founder of Gander Robotics. "I built this company because this problem hits home for me, and I know we can do better. Our technology is a fundamentally new approach to

saving lives at sea.”

About Gander Robotics
Gander Robotics is a defense and dual-use robotics company building autonomous systems to solve critical, non-kinetic military and maritime challenges. The company’s flagship product, the Autonomous Rescue Swimmer (ARS), uses AI-powered sonar and precision navigation to locate and rescue personnel in man-overboard emergencies. The ARS finds those lost at sea when other methods fail. Founded by a U.S. Navy veteran / ocean engineer / MIT MBA, Gander Robotics is headquartered in Cambridge, MA. Learn more at ganderrobotics.com

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