

Port Isaac Lifeboat in double rescue

LIFEBOAT IN TWO DOUBLE RESCUES

TWO women got into difficulties in the sea in two unrelated incidents at about the same time on Friday evening.

In each case a man went to the assistance of the woman and after the alarm was raised Port Isaac Lifeboat went to the aid of all four, assisted by a helicopter from RAF Chivenor.

Later, after an eventful few hours, the Port Isaac craft itself was retrieved by additional crewmen and Padstow Lifeboat.

It was at 7.25 p.m. that the Port Isaac lifeboat was launched following a message that two people had been cut off by the tide at Hole Beach, near Trebarwith Strand.

On the way to this incident the lifeboat crew of Barry Slater (helmsman), Harry Pavitt and John Trayhorn were diverted to Penhallick Point. Here they found a man and a woman clinging to a lobster pot buoy just off the Point.

Both were suffering from hypothermia and shock and the woman had severe lacerations to her body. They were hauled aboard the lifeboat and given first aid before being hoisted on to a rescue helicopter to be taken to Stratton Hospital.

SURVIVAL

It is understood that the woman Lyn Walters, aged about 30, of Alveston, slipped off rocks into the sea and the man, 36-year-old Melvyn Boot, of Allestree, Derby, had jumped in to assist her. In a heavy swell at high tide they could not get back on to the rocks and clung to the buoy for survival.

The lifeboat was then taken in to Hole Beach where a 4ft. to 6ft. surf was running right up over the rocks. A slightly injured woman and a man were stranded in the corner of the beach, both suffering from shock and exposure. Darkness was fast approaching.

The woman, 21-year-old Andrea Brand, from West Germany, was either washed off or fell off rocks into the sea and had swum for the refuge of the small cove, hurting herself in the process.

The man, Barry Ekener, a police officer on holiday from Bradford, dived in to assist the young woman. The lifeboat moved in and got the two of them on board in a highly tricky manoeuvre.

Then, unfortunately, an extra large wave caught the Zodiac boat and dumped it on the rocks where it was stranded in the dark by the now ebbing tide.

OVERHANG

The helicopter in the meantime had returned from Stratton, but could not lower a winch man because of the overhang of cliff at this point.

When the tide had receded sufficiently the young woman was taken on to the beach to be hoisted on to the helicopter and transported to Stratton Hospital.

The uninjured police officer was taken up the steep cliff path by members of Boscastle Cliff Rescue team.

A rapid recovery of the lifeboat was now necessary and the station hon. secretary Mr. David Castle rushed three crew members and three helpers to Hole Beach to assist in this.

They went down the 300ft. cliff and lifted the boat over the rocks to the beach. The 48ft. Padstow lifeboat, which had been alerted, stood 400 yards off-shore, illuminating the area with her powerful searchlights.

A line was fired ashore to which the Zodiac was attached to be hauled through the now 3ft. surf to the open sea. Her engine was restarted and, in company with the Padstow lifeboat, she returned to Port Isaac, arriving at 12.30 a.m.

Mr. Castle later described the Port Isaac lifeboat crew's action as being "an outstanding service." He was full of praise for their determination and their assessment of the situation at all times.

It was 7.21pm on August 26th 1983 when David Castle, secretary of the Port Isaac inshore Lifeboat, got a report from the Coastguard that two people were cut off by the rising tide at Hole Beach, Trebarwith, some five miles up the coast. Although the weather was fair and one might have expected the rescue personnel to be 'off their guard' so to speak, in fact there was no need to fire the maroons because, as is their habit, both secretary and crew were all casually listening in to communications between the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre at Falmouth and the Boscastle Coastal Rescue Team. These men are never off duty, and always on the alert.



Inside Port Isaac harbour there was little swell and no sea running, the wind being a mere seven knots or so from a northerly direction. Visibility was good, and within five minutes of hearing the distress report the 16-ft 'D' class inflatable with its 40hp outboard was launched and speeding from the harbour. Barry Slater (41) the helmsman, accompanied by Harry Pavitt (39) and John Trayhorn (33) expected little trouble in getting to the two trapped holidaymakers. High tide that evening was at 8 o'clock, so there was only half an hour before high water. In that time the tide would not rise appreciably.



As they left the harbour the speaker of their powerful VHF radio crackled into life; about a quarter of a mile beyond Hole Beach at Penhallick Point a woman had just been washed off the rocks. There was an unmistakable sense of urgency now in David Castle's voice as more detailed reports came in. Another holidaymaker, seeing the woman's plight, had courageously plunged in to give assistance. Out there in the open sea as the inflatable surf-rode the waves it was quite clear that there was a much bigger swell running into those beaches than had been thought. All along Tregardock and Trebarwith they could see the white mist of lifting spray where the swells broke with thunderous roar. Anyone attempting to scramble ashore on those rocks – which the rescue crew knew well – stood little chance of survival. This emergency was of a different calibre to the original call; seconds might well count.

When the skipper opens up the engine to give full power on these inflatable lifeboats, it is no longer a question of being afloat: the entire boat is a skimming surfboard that literally leaps across the waves. To remain unharmed one has to adopt a particular posture while kneeling so as to lessen the shock of the hammer-blows as the boat slaps down, then leaps again to 'fly' – sometimes literally free of the surface – to the next wave. It is a skill that only comes with practice, and meanwhile the crew must be on full alert to hear any new instructions coming over the radio from base, and also to navigate the craft unerringly to the casualty area.

As they sped towards Penhallick Point the swells built up in height due to the shallowing seabed. Barry Slater casting an eye astern, assessed the rank upon rank of swell-crests advancing inexorably towards the shore. Seamen learn to read the ocean. There are periods when these swells diminish in size, and then periods of about equal length when they grow again. It is imperative that one chooses exactly the right moment to go in close to recover casualties. Barry eased the power off as they neared the area, and then they simultaneously sighted two dark objects very close to the rocks. It turned out to be the head of the man who had jumped in to assist, and a spherical lobster-pot buoy onto which he was holding with one hand. Though they could not at that moment see it, he had his other arm round the woman. As each successive swell reached them, building up to break with enormous force on the rocks beyond, the heads disappeared under water.

"I reckon," said John Trayhorn, "another couple of minutes and they have been 'goners'. We scooped them both aboard and found the woman badly lacerated from her attempts to regain the shore. They were both suffering from exposure and shock, so we wrapped them in blankets to retain their warmth."

Meanwhile, ashore, the back-up team had not been idle. A rescue helicopter was speeding to the area from Chivenor, piloted by Flight Lieutenant Mike Douglas. No sooner had first-aid been applied than this was hovering overhead, with Larry Evans, the winchman, dropping down on the end of the thin wire to connect with the stationary Lifeboat. At 7.55pm both rescued persons were being whisked to Stratton Hospital. Which still left the two original trapped people on Hole Beach wondering what was going on!

"We could see them huddled on the rocks in the mouth of the huge shallow cave which gives the beach its name," Barry explained. "I reckon they had walked round the rocky point from Trebarwith Beach without realising the tide was rising, and too late discovered they were cut off. Long before the tide would have receded again it would have been dark and very dangerous to attempt a return round that point."

After careful appraisal he took the Lifeboat straight in 'on the back of a swell' to ground on a flat rock which every now and then dried out as the swell receded. This is an extremely difficult and tricky manoeuvre calling for split-second timing, but these men are experienced by constant training in just such action. As the boat dropped down on the rock John and Harry leapt out, got their footing and swung the boat's bow right round to face seaward, so as to take the next breaker 'on the nose'. As she floated again they allowed her, under control, to be swept back to yet shallower rocks where she could be safely left for a brief moment while they attended to the casualties. They once more turned out to be a man and a woman, the latter suffering from abrasions. After giving first-aid they got the woman aboard – the man elected to remain ashore until the tide fell and a shore rescue team could reach him.

Now started the immensely more tricky business of getting afloat again and clear of the rocks. One cannot physically lift a 17-cwt boat and carry it with an injured person aboard across massive boulders which are intermittently covered by breakers; the sea itself has to do the lifting and this is why the timing is so critical. But it's one thing to drive a boat ashore, choosing exactly the right moment to run in with the waves behind you. It is quite another to re-float on the surge of a wave, get the outboard propeller lowered, start the engine and get free of the rocks into deep water without any damage. They had very nearly made it, with Harry and John up to their waists in the breakers and Barry all set to turn on power, when disaster struck. The propeller hit the rocks just as the other two pulled themselves back aboard. The inflatable swung across the next advancing wave and boat, crew and casualty were lifted high to be swept back far up the foreshore, where they were left more-or-less high and dry as that one rogue wave receded.

Try as they might, it was impossible to manhandle the boat back to the point from which a second re-launch could be attempted. To do so would, in addition, probably unnecessarily endanger the casualty. "It was now," interposed David Castle, who is also Watchman in Charge of the Port Isaac Coastguard unit, "that I received the classic signal from the cave mouth ... terse ... undramatic ... but conveying precisely what we need to know: 'Harry Pavitt to Port Isaac Coastguard. The casualties are all safe. We have a slight problem and cannot unaided get the Lifeboat out of Hole Beach. We await the return of the helicopter.'"

David smiled at the recollection. "We now had two separate problems," he explained. "First and most important, we had to somehow get the woman out of it and to hospital. Secondly, we had to get more manpower to bring the Lifeboat safely off. The helicopter was due to return and would deal with the first problem. I contacted the Launching Authority for the offshore Lifeboat, requesting that she be launched from her slipway at Trevose Head. This was advisable in the circumstances, since she could then stand by to give any assistance that might be needed. I then organised a party of volunteers from Port Isaac to go down on to the beach adjacent by a difficult cliff path, await the falling of the tide, and round the point to help lift the inflatable Lifeboat into the water."

"Meanwhile," Barry continued, "the helicopter was throbbing towards us out of sight above the cliff. We saw her come into sight and hover there ... almost it seemed she was landing on the cliff edge, and we began to realise what a difficult task the pilot faced. To get a winchman down near enough to us, grouped as we were actually in the cave mouth with the waves breaking round about, he would have to bring the 'chopper' right into the cliff face. It was awe-inspiring to watch. That machine kept coming down ... down ... right into the cliff so it seemed. I believe there was not more than two or three feet between the ends of her rotor blades and the cliff face when it just hovered there like a huge sparrowhawk, and down came the winchman, swinging gently like a pendulum towards and away from the cliff until he dangled just above the breakers. We waded out, grabbed him and pulled him towards the woman, slipped the harness round her and they were away ... up and over the cliff top and we were left in sudden silence."

"But we had our own problem still. We had to get the inflatable Lifeboat and the uninjured man out of the situation, and darkness was on us. We knew that with the falling tide we could guide the man round the point with torches and back up the steep cliff path. But the falling tide left the boat even farther from the water. We were glad to see the volunteer team of muscle-power, but I can tell you it wasn't easy in the darkness with those breakers. The offshore Lifeboat was now on the scene, and close inshore, coxswained by Trevor England. The shot a rocket-line across to us and we pulled over a stout rope. Helped by the shoreside team we manhandled her to the water, leapt aboard and gave the signal for Trevor to steam full power seaward ... we were off in moments!"

"Sounds easy?" laughed John, "but I can tell you more than a few of us were up to our necks in foam before she was out of danger. Our propeller was slightly bent, so we all piled into the offshore boat and towed the inshore boat into Port Isaac. We all went off 'alert' at half-past midnight."

"Not a bad night's work really," chuckled David. "Four people rescued, and only very minor damage to the inshore boat, with no harm to any of the rescue personnel. I've known worse!" What David didn't know – nor at that time any of those involved – was that as a result of indentifying an unknown yacht in Port Quin Bay while on passage to Hole Beach, Trevor England in the offshore Lifeboat was instrumental in preventing over half a million pounds worth of cocaine reaching its potential distributors, and two men went to jail. But that's another story. See exhibit 117

This extract was taken from Coastline of Cornwall by Ken Duxbury