

The Wreck of the Skopelos Sky

On Saturday December 15th 1979, HM Coastguard informed Padstow Lifeboat Station that the *Skopelos Sky*, a 2800 Greek freighter was in trouble off Trevoze Head. She was on route from Garston for Algiers with a cargo of drums of lubricating oil. The wind had been blowing up to violent storm, force 11, from a generally westerly direction since the previous day and by 06.00hrs had reached force 14 on the anemometer at RAF St Mawgan. Widespread damage had been caused all over Cornwall. It was now north west storm, force 10, gusting to hurricane, force 12, with rain squalls, and the tide was in the second hour of flood. The seas were by far the worst any of the Padstow Lifeboat crew had ever contemplated.

By the time the Padstow Lifeboat, the *James and Catherine MacFarlane*, reached the *Skopelos Sky* she was just over a mile offshore of Port Quin. Initially no contact could be made with the crew of the stricken vessel and Helicopter Rescue 69 was called to assist. Eventually radio contact was made and the master advised that he was unable to anchor as it was too rough to send a man on to the fo'c'sle. It was agreed that the helicopter would try to lift off some of the crew but after three men had been lifted off, the helicopter's winchman hit the freighter's superstructure three times and the pilot suggested the Lifeboat go in for the remaining men. The survivors were gathered aft, but the height of decks was such that it depended on the arrival of the right sea at the appropriate moment to carry the lifeboat high enough to get the men off. Coxswain England used all his very considerable boat-handling skill and the full power of his engines. Even so the Lifeboat's forward fairlead was badly damaged when *Skopelos Sky* rolled heavily on to the lifeboat. After five alongside attempts, during which one man threw his suitcase down on to the lifeboat, the freighter's crew waved the Lifeboat away indicating that they would only abandon ship by helicopter. Throughout the five attempts to get alongside, Second Coxswain Tummon and his deck party were on the foredeck of the lifeboat ready to receive the survivors.

Coxswain England concluded that rescue by lifeboat was impossible, except perhaps from the sea itself, and he asked the helicopter to try again. The lifeboat then stood by the casualty's stern while seven more men were lifted off. It was just after 11.00hrs and the 'on scene commander' asked the Lifeboat to remain standing by until further notice. *Skopelos Sky* now began steaming east-west in a figure-of-eight pattern across Port Quin Bay still with her starboard list due to the shift of cargo. By 14.00 hrs the wind was still gusting to force 12 and the state of the sea in the bay was awesome. Close inshore nothing could survive. People watching from the cliffs, 200 ft high at Doyden Point, were losing sight of the lifeboat completely for many seconds at a time although she was no more than a quarter of a mile off shore. Coxswain England afterwards said he felt like 'an insect in a ploughed field'.

The lifeboat kept constant station on the casualty's quarter, taking every possible advantage of whatever lee the freighter herself afforded but being dangerously exposed every time *Skopelos Sky* reversed her course; then it was only the most skilful handling by the Coxswain in meeting the worst of the waves which was preventing a capsize. Arrangements were being made for Clovelly's 71 ft Clyde class Lifeboat *City of Bristol* to take over from Padstow Lifeboat at dusk with Padstow relieving again in the morning. However she had to be diverted to answer another call and Coxswain England said he would be willing to remain with *Skopelos Sky* all night if necessary. By 1500 it was apparent that it would be dark before long and helicopter rescue might be impossible. Coxswain England advised the master of the casualty to steam to seaward and drop both anchors and all the cable he had in an attempt to save the ship, but the master was unwilling to take this action because of the heavy seas being shipped over the fo'c'sle. In the next hour the lifeboat relayed three messages from the Coastguard to the master of *Skopelos Sky* advising helicopter lift, and eventually the helicopter Rescue 21 asked the Lifeboat to inform the casualty that he would now fly over and that the remaining crew should come off now. The master said he would head into wind to drop anchor and asked the Lifeboat to stand close by while he sent a man forward to let go anchor in case the man should be washed overboard. The Lifeboat came in as close as possible to the freighter's side and the anchor was dropped. However, not enough cable was veered and it simply hung up and down. Rescue 21 lifted off three more men before it was dark. The master and one oiler were still on board and they shut down *Skopelos Sky's* engines and switched off all her lights as she lay bows south west and began drifting in with the lifeboat still between her and the shore. The people on the cliffs lost sight of the Lifeboat as she disappeared under the headland over which spray was still flying.

Rescue 21 had departed and a Sea King, Rescue 90, using her searchlight, lifted the remaining men from the ship as she grounded below Doyden Point at 17.23hrs. Seconds later the entire freighter was obliterated in spray as she was hit by an enormous breaker. As the spray cleared, what had been a list to starboard had been transformed into a 45 degree list to port, hard among the rocks.

With the tide now at half ebb, it would be eight hours before the Lifeboat could enter Padstow. The crew were already suffering from their long ordeal with the sea and so Coxswain England decided to try to rehouse. There was a certain amount of shelter from the north west at the foot of the slip and the wind had moderated slightly by the time the lifeboat arrived, but there was still a heavy run on the boathouse slipway. Coxswain England found the keelway on his first attempt but the Lifeboat ranged 30 feet up and down the slipway and the haul-up span was damaged by the keel. The Lifeboat was then held clear on her engines and breasting ropes for 30 minutes while the spare span was fitted and the winch wire re-flaked by the launchers who were at times being submerged up to their necks. Coxswain England put the Lifeboat back on the slipway, again at the first attempt, and though ranging and thumping very hard she was hauled clear. No damage had been sustained except that to her bow when alongside the casualty and she was reported ready for service again at 20.00hrs.

For this service a bar to his silver medal was awarded to Coxswain Trevor England and the thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum were accorded to Second Coxswain/ Assistant Mechanic Richard Tummon, Motor Mechanic Horace Murt, Emergency Mechanics Arthur May and Peter Poole and Crew Members Sidney Porter, Alan Tarby and Edward Hicks. The thanks of the Institution inscribed on vellum were also accorded to each of the slipway helpers: Head Launcher Patrick Rabey, Shore Attendant John Thomas, Assistant Winchman William Tucker and Shore Helpers Ian Macer, Timothy Lloyd, Ian Kendall, Stewart Porter and Frederick Norfolk. A vellum service certificate was presented to Winchman Ernest Bennett.

