

Money for old rope.

Chapter

'On passage to station'

For nearly the whole period of World War II the building of new life-boats had been at a standstill. During this time considerable advances had been made in design and technique and once it was possible to commence building again the problems were enormous. Men and materials were still in short supply and it would have been easier to wait until the situation had clarified were it not for the fact that many of the life-boats on the coast were in urgent need of replacement.

The average life of a life-boat at a station was, and probably still is, about twenty-five years. This may be followed by a number of years in the reserve fleet when she may be used to relieve station boats for refit or in case of accident. This produced a requirement for five or six new boats a year, so the war years had left a back-log of some thirty or more boats in need of replacement.

Designs had been produced and considered during the building hiatus and as soon as possible a construction programme was put in hand. At Groves and Gutteridge at East Cowes and J. Samuel White at West Cowes the moulds for new boats began to spring up in increasing numbers as the scent of freshly sawn oak and mahogany encouraged the shipwrights. Other yards in England and Scotland were also laying down life-boats and although prices had not yet really started to escalate the sum involved was prodigious.

A life-boat is built to the highest possible specification and a resident RNLI surveyor keeps a watchful eye

on every piece of timber and every fitting which goes into her and ensures that the workmanship is of the best. Engines are given lengthy test runs and eventually, when the boat is launched, she undergoes extensive sea trials in rigorous conditions.

For the passage from the building yard to her station the inspector for the district is in command. The coxswain, mechanic and two crew members from the station make the passage with him. This allows them to become familiar with the new boat and ensures that they know all about her by the time they reach their destination. This is of great importance as a new life-boat frequently has to carry out a rescue shortly after her arrival. It is by no means unknown for a life-boat to carry out a rescue on her way to her station.

My first life-boat passage came in July 1946 when I was instructed to take a new life-boat for Douglas, Isle of Man, to her station from Cowes. As it was the height of the summer, when Douglas is filled with visitors and most of the inhabitants busy making money, the coxswain and crew begged to be excused from making the trip. The mechanic, being a full-time employee of the RNLI, had no choice, which apparently was not entirely to his liking. In place of the other members of the Douglas crew a staff coxswain, Sid Hills, and two seamen of his acquaintance were detailed to make the trip under my command.

In fact, Staff Coxswain Hills was a very experienced life-boatman and now spent all his time navigating life-boats round the coast when they went for refit and taking reserve boats to relieve them. Although I had done a good deal of small boat work and plenty of coasting it was

comforting to have such an experienced coxswain with me on my first life-boat delivery, particularly as he knew the people in most of our ports of call and had the routine at his finger tips. This passage together was the start of a friendship which has continued to this day and I can think of no better shipmate. By the time he retired a year or two ago, Sid Hills had completed many thousands of miles in life-boats in all weathers and he must without doubt have a better all round knowledge of the long ragged coastline of the British isles than any other seaman.

We sailed from Cowes in brilliant sunshine and a flat calm. Our next port of call was to be Brixham, nearly a hundred miles away, and with our speed of eight knots we had a long day ahead of us. Not that anybody minded that in the weather prevailing. Soon after we cleared the Needles channel we passed some good-looking planks of timber about twelve feet long and at intervals quite a number went floating by. At last it occurred to me that we might just as well pick some up as they would be bound to come in handy for someone, either at Douglas or one of our ports of call. Of course, from that moment on not another plank did we see, and we must have already passed a hundred or more. No doubt someone else was quicker to appreciate the possibilities than I was.

The new boat, named Millie Walton, was a 46ft Watson type with twin diesel engines. She had a very small cabin and no sleeping accommodation so we had to put into port each night. At sea we lived on sandwiches and could brew tea on a primus stove. We also had a good supply of self-heating soup as used in the services. This is a most excellent article and produces piping hot soup or cocoa in a matter of minutes. The one thing to

remember is to puncture the tin before igniting the heating element, as we discovered the hard way on one occasion when this precaution was omitted. Suddenly the tins began to bulge and creak and one of the crew, realising what had happened, stabbed them quickly with a heavy sheath knife. The result was astonishing. Suddenly the air was full of a strange, sticky mist which coated everything around with a hot, greasy skin. Not a vestige of soup remained in the tins and it took us a long time to decontaminate ourselves and the surrounding bulkheads. Possibly by not so strange a chance the culprit on that occasion was also responsible on another trip for performing the seemingly impossible feat of opening a pressure cooker while still at full pressure. The effect was somewhat similar to that of the soup incident but much more impressive. The little cabin of the life-boat was instantly decorated with an even coating of delicious brown stew. The cooker opener somehow avoided serious injury but was instantly demoted to cook's mate. In fact he was a sterling character named Fred Ireland, my district engineer, who also took passage in new life-boats to ensure the smooth running of the new engines on the long passage and to give the station mechanic a chance to become familiar with his new installation.

Fred and I made a number of passages together, not always in the best of weather and he proved to be a splendid seaman and cheerful companion in all adversities. He was not with me on the trip to Douglas as the Isle of Man was looked after by an engineer named James, who had been with the RNLI for many years and was approaching retirement. He, too, was a first class man in a boat as indeed any of the RNLI employees on the coast had to be.

The fitness of crews on passage has always to be considered, particularly in small boats like the 35ft Liverpool

type, with no cabin and only a small shelter. On one occasion a new boat was due to leave Cowes for one of the Welsh stations and as I was assistant chief inspector at the time I was responsible for making the passage arrangements. I knew that the coxswain at the station had recently undergone a serious operation so I suggested to the hon sec that he should send the second coxswain in his place. Back came the reply that the coxswain was sure that he was fit enough to do the trip, the committee agreed with the coxswain so he was coming. But, the letter continued, 'you need have no worries as the two men we are sending with him will be able to look after him whatever happens'.

I thought that this must be a pardonable exaggeration but asked the inspector who was taking the boat to her station to let me know who these two supermen were. On arrival at their destination the inspector rang me up, obviously much amused.

'As this used to be one of your stations I should have thought that you would have known the answer to your question,' he said. 'The two crew members who accompanied the coxswain were the local doctor and the local undertaker !'. Fortunately the coxswain made no demands upon either.

This little incident gives some idea of the variety of trades, professions and vocations from which life-boat crews are drawn. It would be quite difficult to name any job in life which is not followed by a life-boatman somewhere round the coast. One even finds parsons in crews and as it is widely held by seamen that parsons are better kept out of boats it says a lot for the reverend gentlemen concerned. In some parts of Scotland

the fishermen are said to return to their homes if they meet the minister on the way to their boats, as they say this makes it certain that the fishing will be bad. It would probably be true to say that fishermen in general are a superstitious lot.

To return to the Douglas boat, we had a smooth passage to Newlyn but on leaving that pleasant little port early next morning a big ground swell running up Mount's bay gave some indication of the Atlantic weather round the corner. Sure enough, rounding the Runnelstone buoy and through the Longships channel we were able to test the new boat's seakeeping abilities and I had my first taste of the way a life-boat behaves in rough water. The motion was very quick and it was necessary to maintain a firm hold on something with at least one hand and occasionally two.

All seamen have a bit of coast which they insist is the worst in the world in bad weather. No one will quarrel with the claims of the Pentland firth with its searing tides but the Bristol channel can be very unpleasant on its day and the lack of good harbours on the southern shore can make it difficult for small craft. Once we were past Cape Cornwall things brightened up a bit and we proceeded with calls at Padstow, Tenby, Fishguard and Holyhead. One of our two runners, or temporary crew members, was a Trinity House seaman, on leave from the Shambles lightvessel. From him we learned a lot about life in a lightship with some hair-raising stories of heavy gales and the anchor cable veered to 100 fathoms or more. It seemed that the main drawback of this situation was the time it took to heave the cable in again. The loss of the South Goodwin lightship some years later when all her crew were drowned was a reminder of the perils

of this lonely life and the debt that other seamen owe to the lightship men. There was one survivor from the South Goodwin, not one of the crew but strangely enough a bird watcher, employed by one of the ministries. He remained on board and was subsequently lifted off the stranded vessel, which was on her side on a sandbank, by an American air force helicopter from Manston in Kent. For this rescue the pilot of the helicopter, Captain Curtis E. Parkins, received the silver medal of the RNLI and became the first pilot of an aircraft to do so.

Our arrival at Douglas was not marked by any celebrations but as is usual the new boat was hauled out to make sure that she fitted the keelway and would go into the house. A Mr Nash from the RNLI engineers and architects, Lewis and Duvivier, was present to note clearances and generally confirm that all was well. During my time on the coast Nash and I met many times on similar occasions and became very friendly. His knowledge of the RNLI stations was astonishing and there were few that he had not visited or been concerned in modifications. After the boat had been safely housed we launched again on a full scale exercise with a full crew. This again is an essential as there was a great deal of new equipment in the boat and many differences compared with their old one. Having satisfied myself that all was well and that the crew were happy with their boat I reported to London that she was now ready for service and made my way home.

At Cowes I had noted that the yards of Groves and Gutteridge and Samuel White were full of new life-boats under construction and it looked as if a good deal of my time was going to be taken up in delivering some of them to the western district. At the same time I was still

busy house-hunting but without a great deal of hope of finding anything within the range of my purse and preference. I looked at a number of lovely old Cotswold houses, most of them miles away from schools and shops which put them out of the reckoning. Head Office made no attempt to expedite my move nearer the district and if had not been for the enormous amount of travelling involved I should have been happy to remain in Ruislip. In order to cut down the travelling as much as possible my tour of stations usually occupied two weeks at a time and involved many weary miles in trains and buses.

The ten days involved in going to a building yard for a new boat, doing some of the trials and conducting her to the appropriate station made a change, although hardly a rest. On passage, a day at sea usually occupied anything from ten to fourteen hours or more and the night's lodging at the end of it was not always as warm and comfortable as one could have wished. I sometimes pondered the fact that apart from my time ashore during the Normandy landings I had rarely been so uncomfortable during the war ! All the same, during these trips one got to know the crew and they got to know you, which made things a lot easier when it came to running the business of the station. There was a great deal of quiet satisfaction in the successful delivery of a new life-boat to her station.

There is naturally very little comfort in any life-boat and they are not designed for passage making. Normally they are not at sea for many hours at a time although some very long services sometimes occur. These usually take place when long searches have to be made, such as for missing aircraft. In any case, survivors rarely complain about the standard of accommodation. On passage one just has to make the best of it and get the boat along as fast as

possible. Modern life-boats are much more comfortable and the big, cruising type just like a home from home with all mod cons. In winter the smaller boats like the 35ft Liverpool were likely to be decidedly uncomfortable as there was little room to move about and standing, or sitting on a rather hard bench for ten or twelve hours, tended to emphasise the cold and induce stiffness and cramp. Spray and often great dollops of sea continually smothering the boat soon found its way past any protective clothing and even thigh boots managed to fill on occasion. Once when this happened to me on an early trip and I was trying to get my boots off to empty them the coxswain said to me, 'Don't 'e do that sir. You'll get very cold feet you do'. The thought of spending another four or five hours with water squelching around in my boots was not attractive but he was quite right. My legs and feet soon warmed the water up and I kept as warm as toast. It was a practical hint worth knowing.

In general I was fairly fortunate in my weather for passages - in spite of what some of the crews used to say - but I had to admit that the delivery of the life-boat St Alban's to New Quay, Cardiganshire was more than a bit on the rough side.

We left Cowes about mid-December after a long spell of calm foggy weather and we knew that when it broke there would be wind in plenty. Our departure was delayed owing to a faulty aerial lead and we left a day late, just as the fog cleared and a south-west gale took over. Off the Needles a frigate was carrying out gun trials and in reply to our facetious inquiry by semaphore, 'Do you need assistance?' we received the solemn reply by ten inch signalling lamp, 'No thank you, we are quite all right'. I had an idea that they were not all that good at semaphore

which seems to be becoming more and more neglected. This is a great pity as it is a valuable means of communication for short distances out of hailing ^{range} ~~distance~~. Our joke having fallen flat we concentrated on making the best of our way through the nasty broken water at the entrance to the Needles channel, our antics apparently causing a lot of hilarity on board the frigate. Obviously their sense of humour tended towards the slapstick and custard pie.

It was dark by the time we arrived at Weymouth, where we refuelled, had a meal and departed again. The prospect of rounding Portland bill and a night at sea in an open boat - the St Alban's was a 35ft Liverpool - was not attractive in the prevailing weather conditions but the wind had moderated somewhat and in a spell of bad weather there is often a tendency towards slightly better conditions at night. On leaving Weymouth it was clear that this had indeed happened and we rounded the bill a stone's throw from the rocky shore and comfortably inside the rightly dreaded race. This inside route can only be taken with comfort at the right state of tide and in strong easterly winds there may be little or no calm water however closely the shore is hugged.

This time we were quite all right and once clear of the bill there was only a moderate sea in West bay. As my crew had clearly resigned themselves to a battering and had shown little enthusiasm for the night passage they cheered up remarkably. The long winter night passed reasonably quickly with tricks at the wheel, some hot soup and a lot of banter; this last was mostly directed at the one Englishman from the New Quay crew, named Eric Swan. He had a Welsh wife and his shipmates

were at pains to explain to him what a lot he missed by not being able to speak Welsh. I got the impression that according to them his wife frequently gave details of intimate domestic affairs to other Welsh wives in his hearing.

'You would blush to hear what she says sometimes, man,' said his friend Meurig. Eric refused to rise to the bait however and bore all the chaff stoically.

Approaching the Start the wind came up with the dawn and I began to have my doubts about the state of Salcombe bar. I should have been wiser to use Brixham or Dartmouth which are easier to make in bad weather but I was very fond of Salcombe and thought I would take the opportunity to have a look at it again. There was some fitful sunshine and as we turned into the estuary all the charm of this lovely harbour was brilliantly emphasised on this fickle December day. The bar was lethargic and gave us no trouble so that we were soon alongside the quay being refuelled. We were well looked after by Eddie Distin, coxswain of the Salcombe life-boat, sole survivor of the disaster in 1913 when the boat returning from service capsized on the bar.

We had now been on our feet for most of twenty-four hours and by the time we had dealt with a substantial breakfast most of us were beginning to nod. This was a pity as the day proved to be pleasant with little more than a fresh breeze and it would have been better had we proceeded on our way. As it was by next morning things were very different, with a freshening gale and a heavy break on the bar. Eddie Distin advised against sailing, a suggestion with which I was only too ready to agree and

so we took the day off. It was Sunday, anyway.

Monday morning looked a little better, but not much. I was fretting at our slow progress and the weather forecasts were full of gloom and foreboding, so we sailed out over the still breaking bar and in to the channel where there was a big sea running. Our little craft behaved beautifully and confirmed my belief that the Liverpool was a splendid boat. The modern twin screw version needed a little care when running, because of the big propeller tunnels and the large area of deadwood, but this applied to all RNLI boats of that time. The New Quay men steadily gained confidence in the boat and did not seem to mind the delays, no doubt consoling themselves with the old seamen's motto, 'More days, more dollars'. Fred Ireland, my district engineer, made no comment but took everything as a matter of course with the calm competence of years of life-boat work.

Off the Eddystone the weather again looked very threatening indeed and our radio issued a warning of severe southerly gales. We were due to make Falmouth but there was not much daylight left so I decided to try and dodge the worst of the gale by putting in to Fowey. This proved to be a happy inspiration as it blew an incredible number of knots during the night - ninety, I believe - and we were snug in harbour with the Fowey coxswain John Watters and his dog keeping an eye on our boat. We stayed at the 'King of Prussia' - named it is said, not after the ruler but after a famous smuggler - where we were soundly beaten by the locals at darts and listened to the whistle of the wind with a certain amount of satisfaction. Before I turned in I walked across the quay to take a look at St Alban's and found Watters just going off in his punt to check the moorings, as there was a considerable sea

running even in this sheltered spot. The coxswain's dog evidently did not like the look of things at all, as he barked furiously and seized the leg of his master's trousers to restrain him. Watters picked the dog up and lobbed him neatly but gently into the punt where the animal growled and snarled and tried to prevent his master shipping the paddles. I heard it said that the dog had saved his master's life on more than one occasion.

Tuesday morning saw us under way once more, standing out from Fowey's snug harbour into the now familiar high seas of the channel. Somewhere down towards the Lizard we passed a big tanker going the same way. Yes, passed the huge ship which was eased down to about five knots yet scooping up big chunks of sea which went crashing along her open deck to burst against the bridge superstructure. We ran up close to the wing of the bridge from which the officer of the watch looked down on us with some astonishment and waved his cap encouragingly.

Our gallant little craft was really quite comfortable in these big seas, rising and falling easily as they rushed towards us and only occasionally indulging in a wild plunge or heavy roll when an awkward one came along. With the Lizard astern and Mount's bay ahead things looked better anyway and we had a little Welsh music and a few more home truths for Eric Swan. Some empty cereal cartons came skittering over the waves, revolving rapidly, and disappeared down to leeward making a noise like miniature motorcycles. They were fascinating to watch and there was a Walt Disney air about the whole thing.

Making Newlyn in poor visibility is rather a tricky

business as you are running up into a dead end with the rocky shore of Mousehole on one side and the shallows of Penzance on the other. On this occasion we were close to Mousehole before we sighted the light and a watchful coastguard fired a ~~warning~~ signal to warn us that we ~~w~~^ere standing into danger.

At Newlyn Jack Bennetts, who was hon sec of the Sennen Cove station at that time, had everything ready for us and we soon refuelled, assisted by the Penlee mechanic, Johnny Drew. He then showed us to our lodgings above the harbour where we were welcomed by an ex-Wren who saw to it that we were well fed, early to bed and up at five o'clock next morning.

A strong south-west wind with a high sea and swell greeted us as we cleared the shelter of the land and took the inshore channel inside the Runnelstone ledge. Seas were breaking high up the Longships lighthouse and we were glad of the protection afforded by the line of rocks. Even so the seas began to pile up astern and break in unpleasant fashion, ~~and~~ so we streamed the drogue which improved matters considerably. This canvas cone towed astern checks the boat and prevents her getting up and running on top of a breaking sea, which may well cause her to broach to, digging her bow in and possibly capsizing.

An exchange of pleasantries with the Sennen Cove mechanic, who was testing the radio telephony set of his boat, led to an odd mixture of Cornish and Welsh backchat and as we rounded Cape Cornwall we ran into a smoother patch and were able to loosen our oilskins and dry our necks.

This pleasant spell did not last long and making Padstow in the dark is not the easiest of jobs. We came in close to Trevoze head, ⁿinside the Quies rocks, altering course when Gulland rock loomed up ahead. With only the dim light on Stepper point to guide us we made our way up into the Cove as there was not enough water in the channel to Padstow harbour.

After a meal and refuelling we listened to the weather forecast, which was beastly; southerly gale veering westerly with heavy rain. However, southerly meant the wind astern and we had a lot of time to make up so I decided to proceed again that night. It was not an entirely happy prospect but my previous decision to make a night passage had proved so successful that my gallant crew did not complain. Alas, this time I fell right into it.

Outside there was little wind at all to begin with but as we approached Lundy island it came away suddenly WNW, just before the port beam, accompanied by ~~torp~~erential rain. On top of the big swell still running from the previous blow this soon produced a very heavy breaking sea and with nearly fifty miles to go we were in for a testing time. It was too late to turn back and although one of the crew suggested sheltering under the lee of Lundy I knew there would be no comfort there and we might be weather-bound for days. We were late enough as it was and Christmas was not very far away so I decided to stick it out and go on. Indeed, there was really very little choice.

It was a most unpleasant night. The white, breaking tops of the big waves came rushing at us out of the darkness, sometimes looking as if they must engulf our sturdy little life-boat. Years later, when a crew complained

that a Liverpool type boat was not big enough for the Bristol channel I could not help recalling this occasion. When the press and TV took up cudgels on behalf of the dissatisfied crew I was asked to give my opinion, which I was very happy to do, appearing on several programmes. But I could quite see the point of view of men used to larger craft and there was nothing exhilarating about this wild night. It was hang on, wriggle over the worst ones and hope for the best. Eric Swan proved to be an adept at nursing the boat and between us we spent a lot of time at the wheel. In any case I dare not leave the helmsman's side in case it became necessary to heave-to or at least alter course to bring the sea more on the bow.

Eric was steering, with me at his side peering anxiously into the darkness trying to spot the dangerous ones when a big sea reared up suddenly and flung the boat on her beam ends, filling her to the gunwales. Eric disappeared from the wheel and I caught the collar of his oilskin as he surfaced again in the flooded cockpit. The men sitting under the canopy were sorting themselves out from a jumble of arms and legs, in some surprise at finding that we were still the right way up. Later we found that several stanchions on the port side were bent nearly at right-angles, presumably by the weight of water. Also, as often happens, in the course of time the whole incident became dramatised, even to the extent of suggesting that I went over the side to rescue Eric in the raging seas of the Bristol channel, instead of merely giving him a helping hand in the cockpit. Certainly Eric thought that he was swimming strongly at the time.

After this salutary reminder that the sea demands constant respect - I do not believe that seamen consider it cruel - we seemed to be making irritatingly slow progress with the

engines eased down and heading up to bring the worst waves on the bow. The rain had eased and Lundy north light still showed up mistily astern at times, as if loath to let us go.

But at last I saw what I had been seeking for some time, the loom of Caldy island light ahead. My crew greeted the news with some enthusiasm as there was no doubt that we had all had a trying few hours. In spite of our heavy oilskins and towels round our necks we were all soaked to the skin and I felt that this was the moment to issue a tot of rum all round. To my surprise the only takers were Eric and myself with the result that we both ended up with rather large tots.

Eric, who was again at the wheel or maybe had never left it, was silent for some time after the last drop of the magnificent liquid had disappeared down his eager throat. Then to the astonishment of us all and the speechless amazement of the Welshmen he proceeded to hold forth in what appeared to be fluent Welsh. He told them all about their lives and wives and intimate domestic details and added some very spicy bits of incredible scandal for good measure - or so I was told afterwards. It seemed that after his marriage he had gradually learned to speak the language but had never let anyone in the village know, not even his wife. By this means he had been able to learn a great deal that would have been denied to him otherwise and it was fairly clear that his wife had a great shock coming to her. Alas, it did not do Eric any good and he would have done well to spurn the demon rum. A few weeks later I met him on Carmarthen station with a kitbag at his side, looking very glum.

'I'm back to sea in the lightships,' he told me sadly.

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'When my wife found out that I could speak Welsh she wouldn't have me at home all the time and said I had better go back to sea'.

I expressed my very real sympathy and departed in my train trying to puzzle out the logic of the whole affair. I suppose there was a moral somewhere.

As Caldy island itself showed up in the windy dawn I called up Tenby coastguard on the radio to ask him to pass on our time of arrival. A cheerful voice answered and expressed pleasure that we were safe and sound. When a life-boat is on passage the coastguard is always given details of her itinerary so that they can follow and report her progress. This is a valuable and reassuring service and I have often been relieved to hear a friendly voice answering a call with a weather report and other useful information. It also relieves anxiety when a boat is some hours overdue, as by this time we were.

Soon after nine o'clock we entered Tenby harbour to find a warm welcome awaiting us. Captain Dimond, the hon sec, saw us to our hotel and collected all our wet clothes - which was in fact every stitch we had with us as our double kitbags, stowed under a tarpaulin, had failed to keep out the weight of water we had taken on board. While we were all having hot baths the clothes were ~~all~~ quickly washed and dried at the local laundry and returned warm and ~~dry~~ ^{ready} for us to put on and have breakfast.

It was not long before we were all fast asleep in comfortable beds and when I awoke it was to find that it was still blowing hard and the shipping forecast offered little hope of a change. Our next, and last leg of the journey was round a particularly wild and rocky part of the coast with very strong tides and overfalls and I had no desire to test the boat and ourselves with even worse conditions.

So we took another day off and I had to telephone the chief inspector and once more report that we were weather-bound. On each occasion that I did this I expected him to point out that we were in a life-boat and weather should not worry us. In fact, he was quite sympathetic and said he realised that we must all be pretty weary and that I was to take no chances.

The shipping forecast that evening was guardedly optimistic about the next twelve hours and the wind had certainly moderated. I called the crew together and told them we were off and we all managed to scramble aboard the St Alban's just in time to prevent her taking the ground on the ebb. It was a pitch black night and the seas were still crashing on Giltar point as we made our way out of Caldy sound. The whole coastline from Caldy to Strumble head is rocky and menacing with races and overfalls which react very unfavourably to small boats. Had it been daylight I should have taken the inshore route through Jack sound and Ramsey sound but these are virtually impassable at night. There was a big, oily swell which made me think that more wind was not very far away and that if it came on to blow here we should have a very uncomfortable time.

But we were in luck and St Govan's head, St Ann's head and Skokholm island one by one dropped astern as the ebb hurried us on our way. Once round St David's head with Strumble light in sight we felt that we were nearly home and, astonishingly enough, for the first time dry. We reported our progress to Strumble coastguard and asked him to let New Quay know that their new boat would arrive at about 0800 - at last ! Meurig, who knew the man on watch, asked if he could speak to him. I handed him the

microphone which he held as if it might explode and after breathing heavily for some time blurted out 'Hallo, Danny' and thrust the instrument back into my hand. If only *all*. telephone conversations could be as brief !

We got a wonderful reception at New Quay on arrival that Sunday morning in spite of the fact that they had expected us three days earlier. A maroon went off and the whole village lined the quay giving hearty Welsh cheers. Our landing was filmed for television and a shot of us walking along the quay was used as a test piece for some weeks afterwards, a number of my friends going out of their way to tell me how bored they were with it. I suppose it was fame, of a sort.

Every new boat delivered meant organising a naming ceremony in due course as life-boats are normally not named officially until they arrive at their station. This allows the local inhabitants to take part in the ceremony, which few could do if it were held at the building yard. I found that arranging a naming ceremony was not nearly as simple as it sounded, involving technicalities with launching and tides and providing a suitable platform for the VIPs and viewing accommodation for the spectators; but at this time I had not yet had to deal with this aspect of my duties.

Occasionally members of the committee of management of the RNLI would do part of the trip in a new boat and pretty tough some of these quite elderly gentlemen were. Captain the Hon. Valentine Wyndham-Quin elected to join me on passage in another Liverpool type boat bound for Ramsey, Isle of Man. He stayed at Cowes the night before we left and very kindly invited me to dine with him at the Royal Yacht Squadron. We were the only people there apart from

members of the staff and although I enjoyed my dinner I was affected by the august atmosphere and had a feeling that former members of the Squadron might still be there in spirit - and not entirely pleased at my presence. My host asked what we did about food at sea and when I said we took sandwiches he said he would provide them for the whole crew and ordered them on the spot.

There is not much room in the cockpit of a 35ft Liverpool and Captain Wyndham-Quin, although by no means bulky, cut down what space there was considerably. He was also very tall and received rather more than his share of spray. Round about mid-day the fresh sea air encouraged the pangs of hunger and the Captain dived into his enormous kitbag and produced the Squadron sandwiches. I could see at once that they were hardly designed for hungry seamen but when opened up the packet disclosed some delicate works of art which would not have disgraced a Buckingham Palace garden party. On their being offered to the coxswain he said 'Thank 'ee, sir' and with a large finger and thumb removed half of them. The remainder being offered to the mechanic he removed them in similar fashion and with my mouth watering I watched that delicious food disappear down ~~to~~ unappreciative throats. The gallant Captain showed no sign of dismay and politely accepted one of the doorsteps I had thoughtfully brought with me. The life-boat men had been equally provident and treatin^g the Squadron offering as an Hors d'oeuvre proceeded to demolish great hunks of bread and meat.

During a night passage the small cockpit seemed even smaller and when Captain Wyndham⁻Quin eventually succumbed to fatigue he coiled down in the curve of the after end-box.

Here, with the drogue and drogue rope for a mattress, his long frame looked anything but comfortably disposed. In the middle of the night the taciturn Manx coxswain turned and surveyed the curiously bent figure of the Captain and said to me,

'He doesn't look very comfortable. Shall we overhaul him and coil him down the other way ?'.

In the Liverpool boats and the older Watson type with only a tiny forward compartment it was fascinating to watch the procedure for brewing tea in bad weather. Two men would sit facing one another on the benches under the after canopy, gripping a bucket firmly between their legs. In the bucket was a Primus stove and the men took it in turns to hold the kettle on it. The gyrations of the boats made it an acrobatic exercise and sometimes a particularly violent roll would send men, bucket, Primus and kettle flying; but the tea, when eventually it did arrive, always tasted superb.

The post-war Watson and Barnett boats had quite a spacious cabin fitted with a Primus type cooker on which it was possible to produce a hot meal while under way, if the weather was not too bad. It was not always easy to provide the necessary ingredients as one nearly always made a very early start and a late finish to the day. The crew's idea of suitable food was often somewhat bizarre and a breakfast of black pudding on crumpets was the highlight of one trip. This also produced a strange concoction they called 'penny ducks' (I guessed it to be lumps of highly seasoned offal) and some very suspicious-looking stew. On another occasion the coxswain, who was a very small man, complained that the sandwiches had been cut so

thick he could not get them in his mouth. At the next meal time the door of the cabin went back with a clang and a voice called,

'Come and be measured for sandwiches !'.

There was always something fundamentally rewarding and pleasant about these life-boat delivery trips. A close bond was soon established between those on board, as if the fact that they had spent long days at sea almost in physical contact with one another had led to some deeper understanding. I do not recall hearing a grumble, however bad the weather, however long the passage, or however early the sailing time; but it must be admitted that it was not always easy to muster a crew at five o'clock of a winter's morning when they had only got to bed at midnight the night before.