

Ch 3? On the coast.

Having found out where all my life boat stations were and learnt a little about the way things worked, it became necessary to work out a schedule of visits and inspections. Since each boat had to be launched by me at least once every six months and boats undergoing refit had to be visited at the yards it was quite a complicated business if one was to avoid a lot of unnecessary travelling. Without a car most journeys were very tiring because of the amount of gear there was to carry about and the inaccessibility of many stations involved a good deal of foot-slogging with the heavy load. Very often, having carefully planned a series of inspections and warned the hon sec of the impending visit, an urgent instruction would arrive from head office with details of some complicated situation which had to be ironed out. Indeed on one occasion I had just arrived at Fleetwood almost at the extreme north of my district when a telephone call instructed me to proceed forthwith to Bluehead at the extreme southern end. Another little jaunt involved a train journey from Lytham to Abergwyth which for sheer frustration and lack of refreshment remains high on my list of sufferings in the course of duty.

Every life boat station had its own ideas about when inspections or exercises should take place. When many of the crew were in ordinary employment it was difficult to get a launch except at week-end as

their employers were not keen on giving half a day or more off work during the week quite naturally. On the other hand an inspector could not get all his visits done at week ends and also liked a weekend at home occasionally. So there was always a certain amount of persuasion necessary. In summer, of course, inspections could take place after working hours but in winter, although a night exercise ~~was~~ useful and held at times, it was not considered advisable to make a habit of it.

The method of launching the boat varied from station to station and no two places had exactly the same conditions. Some boats lay afloat but this did not by any means ensure an easy exercise. At one of my early visits to Rytham the time of the inspection coincided with a spring flood in the river Ribbles and a westerly gale. The howdy boat was moored off the pier and it was by no means a simple task to get aboard her. Then, with fifty life boatmen shaming at the oars we set out for the life boat, moored about a quarter of a mile down stream. With the strong wind and tide we made little or no headway at times but by closing the shore we managed to avoid the full force of the stream and eventually, after three-quarters of an hour's hard pulling, eventually got alongside the life-boat. I thought it was just as well it was only an exercise as the thought of that crew, tough as they were, having to face a long service in such conditions after such a

struggle did not less thinking about. But no doubt
they would have been equal to it.

Ch 3 New crews for old

12/2.

There was little opportunity to replace either old boats or old men in the service ^{of the RIVER} during the war. Building of life boats came virtually to a standstill and some ^{under construction} were damaged by enemy action. Much the same situation arose with crews. As the young men left to fight, older men rejoined the crews in their place and many life boatmen were near the seventy mark. One of the first jobs of a new (District) inspector was to replace over-age boats officers as this proved to be far from easy in some cases. In 1946 many young men had not yet been released from the services and in small villages the manpower was still well below strength. Also, quite a number of elderly coxswains decided that they did not want to retire, usually, it would seem, because they did not want any of the men immediately available to take over from them but wished to wait until a man not yet released returned home. This might be a son or relation and an inspector was likely to find himself involved in what was in essence some sort of local feud, which could be very trying.

At nearly every life boat station there is a long tradition of family involvement. Usually, there are two or more families who have for many years made up the bulk of the life boat crew. When one family is 'in' and provides the coxswain, one or both of the others are 'out'. This arrangement can make the crew meetings at which the boat's officers are elected somewhat exciting.

A meety

One at Haylake to choose a new coxswain had all the ingredients of a local battle and the police had been asked to be on hand but remain discreetly out of sight. Just before the meeting I was discussing possibilities outside the life-boat house with the chairman of the committee who was also an extremely influential Liverpool shipowner. One or two of the supporters of a family not at the time represented in the crew came stalking up to us and bluntly insisted to the chairman that he should say anything he had to say inside the meeting. Rather to my surprise that very worthy as by no means easily influenced gentleman meekly agreed and we adjourned forthwith. In the meeting there were one or two tense moments and some speakers emphasised their remarks by peeling off their coats in an obvious challenge to any dissenters. It was all very straightforward and seamanlike. In the end the rather aggressive faction were voted into the key positions of coxswain, second coxswain and bowman and a new era in the life-boat history of the station had begun.

When I carried out my first exercise with the new crew it was rather embarrassing to find the whole of the old crew leaning on the rails of the promenade and prepared to criticise all the efforts of the new crew. Putting a life boat back on her carriage on a difficult bit of beach and he truly enough at all times but with men that have not

tackled the job for a long time it can be quite dangerous. Fortunately, nothing untoward happened and our audience departed showing signs of disappointment.

In the Isle of Man a much more difficult situation arose at one of the stations. The coxswain, who was over seventy, had taken his son into the boat although the lad was only seventeen and the regulations called for a minimum age of eighteen. I had been told to ~~go~~ inform the coxswain that his boy must not go out in the boat and also to look into the question of a new coxswain. When told that his son could not remain in the crew the coxswain promptly resigned and walked out, so that it became an urgent necessity to fill his place. A crew meeting was called at which only two men turned up, neither of whom would make any suggestion as to a new coxswain. Shortly afterwards a man who had not been in the crew volunteered to take the job on but almost as quickly withdrew saying his wife would not let him do it.

Another crew meeting turned out just like the first and I failed completely to discover why nobody would turn up or even suggest a new coxswain. A discussion with members of the committee after the second abortive meeting led to the suggestion that I should call on each member of the crew separately and discuss the problem man to man. It was pointed out that owing to the standing

of the ex-corswan in the village, no-one wished to
 be accused of siding against him. When this
 happened it was about seven o'clock in the
 evening and some six hours since I had
 eaten. All the same, accompanied by a
 member of the ^{local} Committee I started by calling on
 the second corswan and gradually worked
 through the whole crew without any sign of
 success, by which time it was not far
 short of mid-night. The second corswan
 had said he would like to know how we
 got on so, in the hope that this was a
 Marx way of saying 'If you feel I'll see what
 I can do'. I returned to him, really expecting
 to find him in bed. He was not, and
 without further discussion on hearing we had
 not had a glimpse of hope he suggested
 we try a young fisherman recently returned
 from the navy. Although it was after
 midnight this young man, Dennis Maddrell,
 was still up and I had a feeling he
 was expecting us but I may have been
 quite wrong. Anyway, ~~we~~ accepted the
 nomination as corswan or conditor. High
 the present second corswan would support
 him and the job was done. I returned
 to my hotel in Douglas much too late to
 get any food but with a ~~for~~ shrewd idea
 that I had done a good night's work.
 Subsequent events have proved that idea to
 be correct and ~~Dennis Maddrell~~ ^{the new corswan}, though now
 not quite so young has proved a very
 fine ~~corswan~~ ^{seaman}. In the matter of crews, experience

continually tended to prove that appearances and apparent ability, are very deceptive particularly when there were so many elderly men in crews, led perhaps by an elderly coxswain, one could not help doubting their ability to deal with a long and difficult rescue in heavy weather. One also sometimes had the situation in which a coxswain would be on the sick list and the second coxswain not willing or not able to take command of the boat himself. This made a very difficult problem as to promote someone, even temporarily, over the second coxswain's head would involve great loss of face for him in the village. The answer was usually to allow a tacit arrangement whereby the second coxswain still retained nominal command but a more confident member of the crew actually took the wheel.

A situation of this sort was never entirely happy from an inspector's point of view and it was always a matter of decency which was the worst of two evils, this as closing the station temporarily. On one occasion one of my less important stations, one in fact which had not had a call for assistance for some considerable time, was operating in the way described with an obviously far from confident second coxswain. One evening the hon sec rang me up and told me that a member of the RNZI committee of management was going to visit there next day and he was afraid he might take exception to the manning situation. I immediately said

the boat was not properly manned
 that if he felt ~~that way~~ the ~~only~~ thing to do
 was to put ~~that boat~~ off service and inform the
 consignor as his flank stations. He was
 a very calm, efficient gentleman and ^{said he would do}
 exactly as I suggested so I immediately informed
 the Chief Inspector who approved. When the
 members of the committee arrived as for the
 boat off service he was furious and it looked
 very much as if someone had suggested to him
 that all was not well as that this was
 the reason for his visit.

The result of this little episode was that
 an inquiry was held at R.N.W.I. head office in
 which the Chief Inspector was cast for the part
 of first malefactor and myself as second
 although perhaps it should have been the other
 way round. When asked why I had suggested
 putting the boat off service when I knew a
 member of the crew was visiting the next
 day I replied that the visit was merely
 a coincidence and that the reason for putting
 the boat off service was the fact that the
 hon. sec had expressed doubt as to the ability
 of the crew as they constituted. The
 aggrieved member then said he thought I should
 have waited until after he had paid his visit
 to which I replied that if the boat was
 not ~~to go to sea~~ ^{to be} the only possible action was
 to take it out of service immediately and
 any other course ^{would have been} highly dangerous.
 Both replies were ^{virtually} unanswerable and the verdict
 of the court of inquiry was that our action
 was the correct one. I do not think the
 gentleman in question liked me very much after that.

In fact, I do not believe the majority of members of the C of M really appreciated the ^{great} difficulties of the time. Dr indeed the ~~almost constant~~ ^{continued} difficulty of finding suitable crews in some places where the seafaring tradition had withered.

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No two life-boat stations are alike and each one has its own peculiar problems. In every case the first consideration was the ability to get the boat into the water and away in as short a time as possible. In some places this might mean that the boathouse was a long way away from where everybody lived and the crew would have a considerable distance to go from their homes or places where they worked. One such station is St David's in Pembrokeshire, where the lifeboat house is sited at the bottom of a steep cliff and reached by an incredible number of steps. A sort of miniature funicular railway allows stores to be lowered and disassembled gear to be winched up to the top. The situation is one of great beauty on Ramsey Sound, looking across to Ramsey Island but the surrounding waters are torn with rocks and reefs and a stout heart is needed in bad weather. When the maccos are fired to call out the life-boat the crew come hotly on and in all sorts of conveyance including, in my time, tractors and horses. The hon Sec then was Dr Soes, successor to Sir Walford Davies as organist of St David's Cathedral and a man of great character and charm. He, too, would come rushing to the station in his car, probably picking up crew members on the way. He, also, against the rules of the

PAH, usually went to sea in the life boat
because, as he explained to me when I suggested
that he 'ought to be available on shore' & he was
the only one that knew where to bang the wireless
when it would not work!

Spinning a sea yarn: The log of a lifeboat inspector
lifeboat will launch: →

Oh! lifeboats and lifeboat stations.

All round the 7,000 miles of coastline of the British Isles some 140 lifeboat stations stand ready to launch their boats to the aid of mariners in distress. In addition, both at these major lifeboat stations and at many smaller stations in between, the inshore lifeboats are ready at a moments notice to help swimmers, dinghy sailors and all sorts of pleasure craft that have got into difficulties. Viewed as a whole, this is a very large and very costly sea rescue organisation and not a penny of the necessary finance comes from the taxpayers or the ratepayers!

The reason is that the dangerous work of rescue is best carried out by volunteers and that is what lifeboatmen are. Because they are volunteers and because it is not necessary to have a full crew standing by the boat for 24 hours a day, the whole organisation was, and still is, formed on a voluntary basis. Even fervid champions of nationalisation have conceded freely that it would be unwise to alter this typically British system which has worked so well for so long. So the RNLI remains a voluntary organisation working in the closest co-operation with the other branches of the sea rescue services - the Coastguard, ~~Army~~ Navy and Air Force. Whatever changes may come, the voluntary principle is bound to remain in some form or another for the determination to risk all to save others cannot be reduced to simple terms of monetary reward.

A quick glance at the map of Britain

on pay - shows that the lifeboat stations are ~~very~~ close together in some areas and very wide apart in others. ~~A number of reasons account for this~~ The main reason for the siting of a lifeboat station is the possibility or even probability of casualties occurring in the area and of course the presence of fishing fleets has always been a consideration, particularly in the early days.

Walking along the cliffs, a sudden bend in the coastline may reveal a lifeboat house and slipway, tucked away in a sheltered cove, or a small harbour may proudly display the familiar blue hull of a lifeboat lying quietly at her mooring. Then there are lifeboats which are transported on and launched from steel cradles towed by powerful tractors and both which launch down steep single beaches on heavy wooden planks known as skids or trows. No two lifeboat stations are exactly alike and the problem of where to put a boat so that it can be safely maintained and yet get away to sea quickly when required is one of the most difficult that the RNLI has to face.

The ever changing coastline produces special problems of its own, so that some lifeboat houses suffer from ~~an occasion~~ a build up of shingle and thus ^{become} ~~more~~ further and further away from the sea while others feel the effect of the more usual erosion of the

coastline and find themselves moving gradually out to sea. ^{Examples of these disturbances} may be seen at ^{places like} Dungeness where the station has had to be moved nearer the sea at intervals of a few years and Belsey where it became necessary to build an entirely new house & slipway because the old one was getting further and further out to sea and the foundations were being undermined.

Nearly all slipway stations are prone to tilting up at the end of the slipway, some at regular intervals and others due to prolonged heavy weather, possibly from an unusual direction.

So it will be seen that it is not just a case of saying that this or that place needs a lifeboat. It is a case of determining first whether it is a practical proposition to keep a lifeboat there, and also whether it will be possible for the boat to put to sea in any weather and at any state of tide.

Because of the variation in local conditions it was at one time considered necessary to design and build a fairly wide variety of lifeboats to suit these conditions and the requirements of the local crews. To a large extent standardisation of design has now been achieved and this has made the task of maintenance very much easier and less costly, but there are still special designs for to deal with the more difficult launching conditions.

Boats which are housed and launched down a slipway naturally have to fit the house and the slip, so although some modification of these can be carried out reasonably, major alterations would be

unacceptably expensive

Notes for DWH1 paper back. 'On the coast'
years of the life boat gear

Have you noticed that some books use words that seem to have been made up?

- 1 About L/B stations
When a new inspector of L/B's joins etc.
First trip down the coast - just after
was very austere - transport stores - Raulwiche
journey from Fleckwood to Abergwyth etc
Units of 46-47 - Rhyllunnon.
Some other years of early exercises, 3 to 3 M
- 2 Delivery life boats - slogans of trips - the
men - naming ceremonies 3 M.
- 3 wrecks & rescues.
- 4 Odd happenings (Antiques etc) include visit
Crew meetings & committees to island
- 5 Int. Corps & visits abroad.
- 6 ? Disasters

Introduction - Foreword (You can skip this
if you like but it's worth reading!)

Re-write MFOR?

1 Start first chapter straight on to amusing
or exciting incidents, eg Mumbles disaster &
delivery of reserve boat afterwards - Travelling
works 46.47 - Crew meeting to elect coxswain
at Hoylake - Man with ashes at Rhyl, Ramsey
service to fishing boat on fire etc etc.

log of a L/B mst.

(But it is very unlikely that anyone ever sets out in life to become an inspector of lifeboats and just as unlikely that more than a handful of people have ever heard of such a person.) ^{with} Boyish determination to become an engine driver is reported to be his in evidence today and certainly the modern diesel or electric locomotive has little of the majestic appeal of the now obsolete steam variety. →

It is even doubtful whether the hardy mariners who become lifeboat inspectors ever considered applying for the post until the very moment they did so. It would probably be fascinating to trace the ~~course~~ of events which brought about the abrupt change of course in the life of a seafarer but there can be little doubt that at the back of it all was a great love of the sea and the desire to do a really worthwhile job.

Normally the opportunities of joining the lifeboat service as an inspector are pretty few as far between and until comparatively recently it was almost unheard of for an inspector to resign and change his job. This was probably due to the fact that although clearly not the way to great riches there were so many rewarding factors that, like most vocations, the work of sea rescue exercised a powerful influence which makes any other activity seem pale and uninspired.

1. EWM lay sleeping soundly in his room at the Castle Mona hotel in Douglas, Isle of Man. He woke with a start at the sound of an insistent and noisy knocking on the door, which was followed by an urgent voice saying, 'Police, Sergeant —'

In response to a sleepy, 'Come in, Sergeant' the officer entered as EWM switched on the light. It was 5.0 am.

'Your Head Office have asked us to contact you, Sir, and give you this message. There has been a disaster at Mumbles and you are to proceed there with all speed.'

It was blowing a full gale and had been all the previous day and heavy dressed M could do nothing until the airport at Ronaldsway came to life. When this occurred the response to a request for a priority booking on the first plane to the mainland produced the reply that all aircraft were grounded owing to the gale and were unlikely to fly until later in the day, if then.

This meant the steamer to Liverpool

which left Douglas about nine o'clock in the morning, arriving at Liverpool round about mid-day. Not a very speedy start to the — mile journey but unavoidable. A rough crossing and what seemed an interminable journey. Their journey to Swansea was occupied chiefly by conjectures as to what might have happened but on arrival it was at once clear that the worst had happened — the Maudslayi life boat had been lost with all hands together with the whole of the crew of the ship to whose assistance they had launched; — men in all.