

Safety at sea

The sea doesn't always win

One wizened veteran reminisces about safety, life and death as men battle the fury of the sea

Young men look forward to life: they can not wait to get on with it. Old men reminisce and philosophize on the meaning of life. It is a sobering thought to have joined the latter.

Looking back to the days when I was at primary school in a small Scottish village, the fishing was a very different industry then. The boats were smaller and featured less mechanization, and much more of the processing was done locally. Most of the boys in that classroom became fishermen, most of the girls married fishermen. That was the way it had been for hundreds of years.

School holidays were an opportunity to get to sea, either on the local small boats hand-line fishing for mackerel or in the larger boats that went to sea overnight to drift-net for herring from the nearby harbour. On weekends, the fishermen would spread out the drift-nets to dry, and we would join in the work, eager to show that we were able to do the work of men. Both my parents came from extended families and there were many cousins of the same age. We were the 'war babies', having been born during the Second World War, which was a fairly recent memory. Our family had been very fortunate during the war. Fishermen had been drafted into the navy and many had the very dangerous job of minesweeping. Most of my uncles were in this category, but all returned safely from the war. Living in a remote village meant that those who remained at home were not subjected to the bombing that happened in the cities further south. None of the immediate families had the horror of having an official telegram delivered advising them of death.

It was against this background that one Sunday morning my uncle came striding

down the street towards our house. Missing was the friendly greeting, the usually humorous banter. It was obvious something was wrong. A quick discussion with my father, and the two of them set off down the road, heading towards the other end of the village, with the long, loping stride that was a family characteristic. Quite a few years passed before the enormity of what they were about to do hit home. They had to tell a young woman that their younger brother, her husband and father of their four children, had drowned.

About the same time, the local lifeboat was lost. It had been called out to assist some local boats into harbour. Manned by local fishermen and volunteers, it became victim to the 'exceptional one', the larger-than-normal wave, the one that rises out of nowhere, approaching at normal speed, and then increasing in height until it is no longer stable and breaks, assuming the speed of a rushing train carrying hundreds of tons of water in a maelstrom of forces. Even large boats fear these waves, while small boats, even lifeboats, succumb to them. The lifeboat in question was dashed up the back of the breakwater and, in sight of the people on shore, the would-be rescuers became the victims. Only one of the eight crew survived.

Tragedy twice

In the following years, Scottish lifeboats were lost on two more occasions, along with most of their crew. Paradoxically, in both cases, the vessels that they set out to save survived. Again, twice, came the full panoply of ceremonial funerals, with whole communities in mourning, and the newspapers crying out with "The Price of Fish" headlines. Small communities were besieged with national newspaper reporters out for a story, and television

cameras seeking footage. The outsiders appeared puzzled, since they were often met with hostility, where usually there was always someone eager to tell a story to a newspaper. Here, this was regarded a private affair. These 'outsiders' did not know the men who died, so why did they have the right to mourn?

Strange enough, it is the odd cases that remain in my mind: Norman had been a fisherman for about 20 years and had fished all around the UK. At home one weekend, he went out in a small dingy off the beach. Less than 100 m from the shore, the dingy capsized, he got entangled in the kelp, and drowned less than a mile from his home.

Alan ventured further afield and became chief engineer on one of the deep-sea trawlers, not a particularly safe job. In the harbour one could expect a reasonable degree of safety, but Alan fell overboard in the dry dock.

Another who didn't drown was a friend, Sandy. He fell in the harbour but was pulled out in minutes. He had inhaled some oil that was floating on the surface and it just frizzled up his lungs. No, he didn't drown, but he died nevertheless.

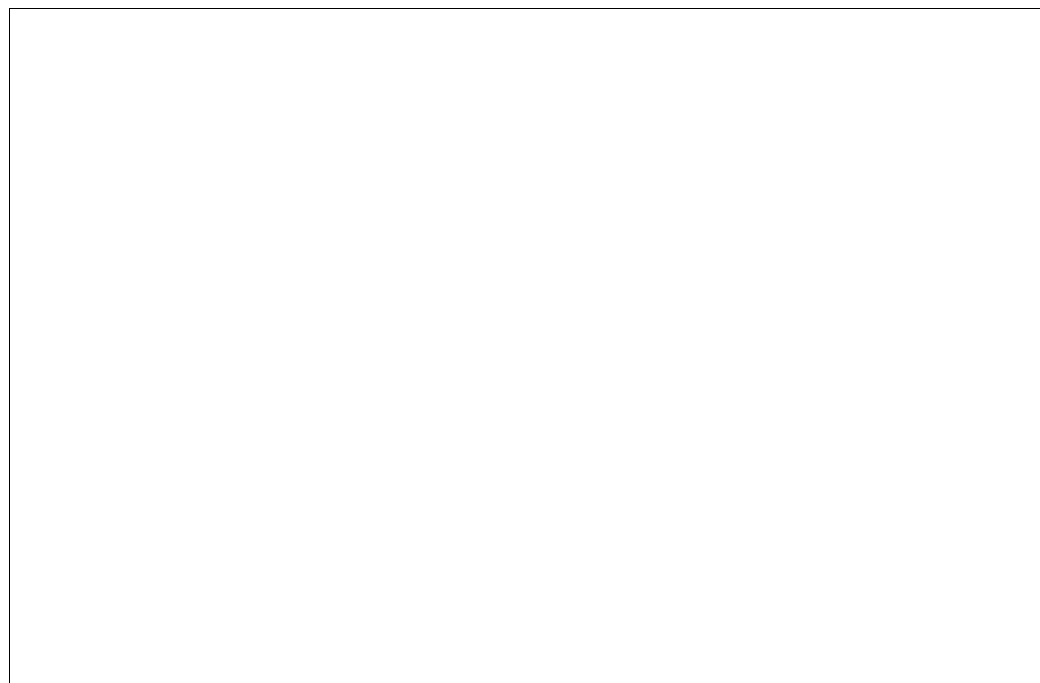
The sea didn't always win. One weekend, a boat went down as she was heading for harbour. She was still about a 100 miles out into the North Sea and the crew took

to the liferaft only after having managed to get a radio message transmitted. This was about the first time that the liferaft had been put to the test, as they were only now replacing the older, unwieldy and leaking wooden lifeboats. All the other fishing boats were already back in harbour, the crew enjoying a well-earned respite on Saturday and Sunday. The news rapidly spread around the town, and the fleet prepared to go to sea again. Not all of the crew could be contacted, so many vessels went to sea with scratch crews—retired fishermen, young boys, etc.

The fleet set sail into the grey North Sea, a ragged trail of boats leaving the harbour, as each boat managed to get enough manpower to sail, heading northeast. All the wireless sets in town were tuned in to the marine channels to catch the discussions between the skippers. This was more interesting than the programmes on BBC. It concerned people whom they knew and could identify with. However, as the fleet went farther and farther from land, the reception got poorer, although within the fleet itself it was still good.

Single line

As the fleet reached the search area, the ragged line of fishing boats transformed itself into a single line abreast, with a distance of 1 mile between each boat. The line swept forward, combing through the



ocean, with lookouts searching for any sign of life. Eventually, the liferaft was sighted—a small orange object, occasionally rising on top of a wave and then disappearing again as it dropped into the trough. Within moments, the crew was pulled aboard one of the fishing boats. The crew had been in the liferaft 24 hours and, twice during that time, the liferaft had been rolled completely over by large waves.

The whole fleet then turned for the harbour, returning with a catch more valuable than fish. The more religious fishermen were singing hymns on the wireless because it was now Sunday. All along the coast, their relatives and friends were attending services in churches and halls, where usually the favourite hymn was “For Those in Peril on the Sea”.

No, the sea didn't always win, but it would always come back for more.

The most common loss of life occurred when a vessel went down without the crew being able to transmit a distress message or to launch a liferaft. There were no Emergency Position Indicating Beacons or satellite communications in those days, and fishing vessels sink remarkably quickly in bad weather. The modern approach is that a vessel does not sink and the crew is lost because one thing goes wrong. It is when a combination of

things goes wrong at the same time and back-up systems don't work that these accidents occur.

The first indication of disaster is when nobody has heard any radio messages for a while. Then, perhaps the boat would not land by the time she was scheduled to. This would lead to an increasing concern, developing into a growing awareness, that, once again, fate had picked out one vessel. As time went on, there would always be some element of desperate hope that, somehow, the boat and crew had survived. But, as the time dragged on, that flicker of hope would be extinguished, and, in place, would come the crushing realization that, once again, the sea had claimed its toll. Often the lamentation would be made much more poignant because there were no bodies to grieve over or to bury.

There is a woman in the village who has lost her husband, her brother and her son in separate accidents at sea. Such vagaries of fate are hard to explain and even harder to bear. Some families are lucky and have few losses.

Close escapes

Of course, every fisherman has the story to tell about the close escape he has had. Most admit to being afraid at the time. As the fisherman poet Peter Buchan wrote, “More often, what appears to be iron will is no more than want of sense”.



I had my close call too. We had set off for the harbour as the weather grew worse, and I was on watch in the wheelhouse with a young teenager. The area we were crossing slowly became shallower, and the sea became rougher along that edge. Though it was only gale force, the choppy sea meant that you always had to be on the alert. Then, one of the waves rose higher than the rest. Not only was it higher than the rest, it was still rising and hadn't yet broken. This was going to be a nasty one — and we were right in its path.

Some of the training that we had hoped never to use came into play — head the boat up into the wave, not too fast or the boat would shoot out over the top of the wave and you would find yourself on a boat in mid-air; and never too slow, which is even worse. If the boat breaches the wave, it will easily roll over. The wave keeps on rising higher and higher, until it starts breaking about 20 m in front of the boat. At this point, you are not looking at the wave but looking up at it — an ugly, greyish, foamy mass rushing forward with the noise and power of a steam engine. As the wave breaks against the wheelhouse, you duck to avoid the shards of glass that would be driven inwards if the wheelhouse windows give way. However, they hold, and the wave rumbles over and is gone.

It seems remarkably quiet, the boat isn't moving so much. The wheelhouse windows haven't cleared, but there is a green light filtering through. As the water falls away, you find your eye is at water level. The whole boat is underwater and only the small part of the wheelhouse is above the water. Gradually, the boat rises, shaking the water off the deck like an old dog. The engine is labouring, as it was never meant to push the whole boat through the water. This is a dangerous time, as even a small wave hitting now could be the knock-out punch. Fishermen generally believe that these waves occur in groups of three and, in fact, scientists now say there is some truth to this. However, that is another story for another day.

This time, we are lucky, and the boat gradually floats on the surface like a boat is supposed to do. However, the deck is in a shambles. The wireless aerials are lying

on the deck washed off the top of the 30-ft mast. Inch-thick oak boards are broken in twos, with the shards speared into the other side.

The crew has to get up on deck to clear the mess. As the teenager and I are in the wheelhouse, we watch the crew tidying up and, at the same time, keep an eye windward for signs of any other wave that might come down. I ask the boy whether he was afraid. He replied "No, I was not afraid, because you were not afraid!" I did not admit to him that I was sitting down after it was all over only because my knees had turned to jelly. ¶

First Person

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