THE PRESS AND JOURNAL TUESDAY JULY 7 1981

Coastguards claim chief is 'scapegoat'

A ROW is simmering in the Clyde coastguard region over the impending retirement of Commander John Douglas, regional controller.

Many of the rank-and-file, full-time and volunteer coastguards in the Clyde area believe he is being made the scapegoat following a fatal accident inquiry at Oban recently into the death of German holidaymaker Mrs Margarita Zender on the Isle of Coll.

It is understood Commander Douglas is being retired with effect from Friday, on full pay until the end of the year, instead of next March.

A number of coastguards started a petition in support of Commander Douglas last weekend but have been told by senior officers they were breaking regulations. Now the petition, to Trade and Industry Secretary Mr John Biffen, has been dropped.

The petition stated: "The Clyde Region are appalled at the impending forced retirement of Commander John Douglas and the abrupt notice given him. The entire region believe (and not without good cause) this is his head on a platter to the Ministry of Defence (air) following the Zender fatal accident inquiry at Oban."

The petition had been circulating widely in the Clyde Region, which covers the whole of the West of Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man. It had gained the support of many coastguards and of at least one volunteer rescue company.

The fatal accident inquiry found the coastguard blameless of Mrs Zender's death. She was found dead beside her husband after their upturned dinghy had drifted to Coll. A search party found the couple on the second day of a wide-ranging search organised by the coastguard from the Oban station.

A senior RAF officer told the inquiry a rescue helicopter was offered from RAF Leuchars for the second day of the search, the day Mrs Zender was found, but wad declined by the coastguard for operational reasons.

JOHN DOUGLAS

A trade and industry spokesman yesterday denied there was any connection between Commander Douglas's retirement and the German woman's death. He said Commander Douglas was 62 and had twice had his employment extended beyond the Civil Service retirement age of 60. He refused to make further comment on what he described as staffing matters. He admitted, however, there had been much contact between the defence ministry and the coastguard since the inquiry.

Commander Douglas, who is on leave, was contacted at his home and refused to comment, but indicated he was taking legal advice.

At the Greenock headquarters of Clyde coastguard, all inquiries were referred to the Department of Trade and Industry.

Why RAF will defy the coastguards

By GEORGE HUME and RODERICK FORSYTH

ANGRY RAF helicopter rescue crews have decided they will fly on lifesaving missions — even if coastguards tell them not to.

They believe the life of a German holidaymaker who drowned off the West coast of Scotland could have been saved if they had gone to the rescue.

The decision to call in the helicopter squads has always lain with the coastguards. But, after a bitter row between the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Trade, the RAF at Pitreavie, Fife, has said: "In the future we will decide if we're needed."

The tragedy which led to the row occurred last August, off the island of Coll, when mother-of-three, Frau Margarette Zehnder, (50), died lashed to a capsized rubber raft about 60 minutes before a lifeboat drew alongside to rescue her and her husband.

The RAF believe that if their pleas to send a helicopter out at first light to search for them had been listened to the tragedy may have been avoided. But a request for a helicopter to aid the search was cancelled by the coastguard in Oban.

The Maritime Search Committee in Whitehall is now understood to be considering whether control of sea searches for civilians should be taken out of the coastguards hands and put with the Ministry of Defence.

Whatever the decision of that committee the RAF at Pitreavie has opted for unilateral action and will now put up a rescue helicopter when they feel it warranted.

The row that has simmered since that August night of high winds and driving rain when the Zehnders drifted from just off the shore of Iona to the beaches of Coll, some 25 miles, has surfaced with the early retirement this week of Commander John Douglas, (62), regional controller of coastguards in the Clyde area.

Commander Douglas intends to appeal against his early retirement on full pay. But he has refused to comment.

A spokesman for the Department of Trade said of Commander Douglas's early removal from office: "We would not take a decision about this based on one incident." But he would not enlarge on that remark.

The crux of the row concerns the call-out of a helicopter for the Zehnder search by the coastguard at Oban at 21.55 on the night of Saturday, August 16.

But at 4.55 a.m., the request for a helicopter was cancelled by the coastguard at Oban. The Ministry of Defence say that the controller at Pitreavie was unhappy

So, too, were the police. Senior officers at Lochgilphead made repeated phone calls both to the coastguard and the RAF for a helicopter. But the RAF, working under the ruling that the coastguard is in control of the search, were unable to take any action.

At the fatal accident inquiry into Frau Zehnder's death, Commander Douglas said he stood by the decision of the Oban coastguard not to call in a helicopter.

Strangely, though, the coastguard on duty in Oban, Mr Len Scott, was never asked

SUNDAY STANDARD, July 12, 1981

Tribute to copterman who drowned in rescue bid

A CORONER yesterday paid tribute to the heroism of rescue helicopter crewman David Bullock who battled in near impossible conditions to rescue an American pilot from rough seas.

The struggle ended in tragedy when both men drowned after the winch cable snapped because of tremendous extra strain caused by the pilot's parachute, which could not be cut free. Coroner Mr Oliver Prior said at the inquest in Norwich that 38-year-old Mr Bullock of Aylsham, Norfolk, who had family connections in Wick at one time, deserved the greatest credit for his actions which were "in the highest traditions of service and duty in the RAF".

The coroner added: "He could perhaps have saved himself, but he made a conscious and deliberate decision not to release himself from the pilot in order to continue his life-saving effort."

The ill-fated rescue attempt was made last November off Winterton, Norfolk, following a mid-air collision between two planes on a routine training mission from USAF Bentwaters in Suffolk to a bombing range in the Wash.

One of the planes crashed into the sea and a Sea King air sea rescue helicopter from RAF Coltishall was sent to pick up the pilot.

But the inquest heard that the pilot was unable to free himself from his parachute which kept inflating, dragging him through the sea at between 12 to 15 knots.

When Mr Bullock, a master air load master, was winched down to the unconscious pilot he was unable to free the parachute. He used a knife to try to cut it free, but winds gusting up to 35 knots and through 12ft. high waves meant that both men were completely submerged for half the time.

Helicopter winch operator John Reeson told the inquest they hovered at only 30ft. above the waves, but when the parachute became fully inflated and started to oscillate as they raised and lowered the men out of the water to help free the parachute, the winch cable suddenly snapped.

Mr Prior said he was certain everything had been done to try to save the lives of the two men.

Verdicts of death by misadventure were returned by the jury on both of the dead men.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL WEDNESDAY JUNE 3 19[illegible]

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL TUESDAY JUNE 9 1981

Copter probe

THE RAF is investigating measures to prevent a repeat of the death during a rescue of helicopter winchman David Bullock.

Bullock (38), Aylsham, Norfolk, who was stationed at RAF Coltishall, died when a winch cable snapped last November when he was trying to save an American pilot who ejected into the sea.

A spokesman at RAF Coltishall said they were now considering a two-way radio contact between the winchman and the helicopter crew. At present they use hand signals. They were also considering trying another cable.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL

TUESDAY AUGUST 4 1981

George Medal for Wick-born sea hero who died

A WICK-BORN RAF helicopter winchman who died in a heroic bid to save a drowning American pilot, has been posthumously awarded the George Medal, one of the highest peacetime bravery awards.

David Bullock (38), of RAF Coltishall, Norfolk, could have saved his own life but "consciously and with conspicuous courage chose to remain with the pilot in the hope of saving him," says the citation.

Master Air Loader Bullock was called out last November after a mid-air collision between two US Air Force planes off the Norfolk coast.

As gales whipped up 15ft. waves he hooked himself to the unconscious man and began to cut away the pilot's partially-inflated parachute.

Despite the numbing cold he had almost succeeded when a fierce gust of wind caught the parachute canopy with such force that the rescue cable linking them to the hovering Sea King helicopter snapped.

Winchman Bullock tried desperately to keep the pilot's head above water but eventually lost consciousness as the parachute continually dragged them both under the waves.

Their bodies were later recovered.

The citation says: "He was close to success when the cable broke.

"Well aware of the very dangerous situation created by this catastrophic turn of events, he had every opportunity over a period of three or four minutes to disconnect himself from the pilot and save his own life.

"However, consciously and with conspicuous courage he chose to remain with the pilot in the hope of saving him."

He joined the RAF when he left school at 17. He leaves a son and a daughter who live with their mother at Aylesham, Norfolk. His son Richard (12) intends joining the RAF as soon as he is old enough.

It is believed that MALM Bullock was the first RAF winchman to lose his life in a helicopter rescue mission. It is also believed that the cable was the first to break in more than 30 years.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL TUESDAY JUNE 23 1981

Three rescue heroes get letters of appreciation

THREE men, including one from Westhill, have been sent letters of appreciation from Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Trade Lord Trefgarne for their involvement with an air/sea rescue operation on October 7 last year.

Winchman Mr Norman Crossland (36), Wigan, Lancashire, Engineer, Mr John Skimming (26), Billingham, Cleveland, and medical attendant Mr Matthew Maxfield (36), 3 Lawsondale Terrace, Westhill, Skene, were on board a BP/Bristow's helicopter commanded by Capt. Peter Hall.

They were on their way from BP's Forties Field to Aberdeen when they were directed to the aid of the Inverness-registered fishing boat Rosebloom.

The Rosebloom's main engine bilge pump had failed and she was shipping water in a Force 9 gale 20 miles south-east of the Forties Field.

One of the crew, Mr Richard Crockett (48), 3 Great Western Road, Buckie, had been seriously injured with spine and leg injuries received in a fall.

Normally the crew would not have considered winching down to the vessel, because of the bad weather conditions. But in view of Mr Crockett's injuries and the risk to the Rosebloom they went ahead.

During the operation, Mr Crossland, Mr Skimming and Mr Maxfield had to be winched down to the vessel — thereby exposing themselves to great danger.

As the final lift began, Mr Skimming and Mr Crossland swung into the Rosebloom's mast and the winch cable became entangled in the mast's rigging. Fortunately it was freed quickly and neither suffered any serious injury.

Mr Crockett was taken to hospital in Aberdeen and the Rosebloom later made Peterhead accompanied by other vessels.

Spokesmen from BP and Bristow's yesterday expressed their delight at the letters of appreciation to the three men, two of whom work for BP.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL FRIDAY AUGUST 14 1981

Helicopter heroes honoured

FOUR RAF Lossiemouth helicopter heroes who plucked four Faroese fishermen to safety after their boat had run aground in a gale off Lewis last December yesterday received bravery medals from the Faroese Government.

The awards were handed over at a formal ceremony at Lossiemouth by the Faroese Deputy Prime Minister and Fisheries Minister, Mr Olaf Olsen (centre left).

Receiving his is Flt.Lt. Dave Simpson, the Sea King helicopter captain. Looking on are (left to right) Flt.-Sgt. Ron Webb; Mr Sotus Poulsen, Faroese commercial attache in Aberdeen; Air Marshal Sir John Curtiss; Wg. Cdr. John Lumsden, acting CO at RAF Lossiemouth, and Flt.Lt. Dave Crosby.

Also in the crew was Winchman George Muir.

Mr Olsen said: "We who make our living on the high seas greatly appreciate the services of those who at all hours and in all weather conditions are willing to put their own lives at risk to rescue those in peril. It is thanks to you gallant gentlemen that our fishermen were saved."

The Faroese vessel — the Borgin — ran aground on the rocks off Lewis late in the afternoon of December 2 after engine failure.

POUNDED

Initial attempts by other vessels and by coastguard teams to get to the stricken vessel proved unsuccessful — and when the Lossiemouth helicopter was called out, it took more than two hours to reach the scene because of strong headwinds.

When the Sea King arrived, the Borgin was being pounded by heavy seas — with her sails still rigged.

The effect of the wind and the helicopter's downwash on the sails caused the boat to swing erratically, making it impossible to lower a winchman.

The pilot had to hover "blind" and had to act only on verbal instructions, as a line was lowered to the deck and the four fishermen were winched aboard.

The fishermen were then flown to Stornoway, none the worse for their ordeal, but leaving the Borgin a total wreck.

At yesterday's presentation ceremony, Air Marshal Curtiss, AOC No. 18 Group, also presented Flt.Lt. Simpson with the Queen's Commendation for Valuable service in the Air for his part in another epic Sea King rescue — the lifting off of 22 people from the Swedish ship Finneagle, which caught fire off Shetland in October, 1980.

RAF hero triumphs over disease

LAKEY DEFIES DEATH AGAIN

Rescue pilot gets all-clear

FLT.-LT. Mike Lakey with the golden lion trophy presented to him on behalf of the people of Sweden after a daring cargo ship rescue operation

By ALASTAIR BISSET

THIS IS the story of one man's courage . . . the story of a man who has challenged death twice — and won.

The first time was 16 months ago off Orkney when the courage and skill of RAF Lossiemouth helicopter captain, Flt. Lt. Mike Lakey hit the world headlines with the rescue of 22 people from the blazing Swedish cargo ferry Finneagle.

The vessel was loaded with exploding cannisters of chemicals, and the "mission impossible" has been recognised worldwide as the most daring sea rescue in helicopter flying history.

The second time was four months ago when Mike Lakey — a recognised but reluctant national hero, at the height of his professional flying career — was struck down by cancer.

Mike Lakey — a man whose bravery gained him the George Medal, one of the highest peace time accolades, and a galaxy of bravery awards and citations from all corners of the globe — was grounded.

A new battle for survival, one just as dangerous as the Finneagle rescue mission, had to be faced.

But this was a battle which called for a different kind of courage . . . and for faith.

That battle has now been won.

Within the past 48 hours, the man who has done more than any other to glamourise helicopter rescue flying, has been given the all-clear to fly again.

When Flt.-Lt. Lakey returned from the Finneagle rescue mission in October 1980, spent and exhausted after dicing with death for more than 100 minutes in pitch darkness and above gale lashed seas, he told journalists:

"It is very difficult when, on the one hand, I should be saying that safety is paramount for my crew and my aircraft, and I must go away — while at the same time you see 22 people, including women and children, huddling on the deck of a blazing vessel.

"In a situation like that you can only put your trust in the Almighty — and get on with the task you came out to do."

That statement, more than any other, sums up Mike Lakey's qualities of courage and humility.

That same humility shone through only too clearly yesterday when Flt.-Lt. Lakey, looking older than his 36 years, said: "These last four months have really shown me what courage is all about. It belongs to those doctors and nurses in Aberdeen.

"Theirs is true dedication, and it is their courage and skill which has made it possible for me to return to my job.

"I love flying . . . it is all that I want to do . . . but I don't particularly like the fame and the publicity

"There are others who deserve it more.

"Cancer is not a subject people like to talk about. But if my story can give hope to others, then it will have been worthwhile."

Next week — after months of treatment and therapy following a successful operation in Aberdeen Royal Infirmary — Mike Lakey will be back doing the job he loves.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL SATURDAY FEBRUARY 6 1982

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL TUESDAY FEBRUARY 9 1982

Sea-ordeal boys rescued

Copter plucks them from drifting dinghy

TWO Inverness-shire boys were plucked from the sea to safety yesterday after a holiday fishing expedition went badly wrong.

The boys — Jonathan Ogilvie (14), Pine Trees, Easterton, Dalcross, and Mark Melville (14), 20 Macleod Road, Balloch — were rescued by an RAF Lossiemouth helicopter after they had drifted out to sea in a small inflatable dinghy.

And later, as the boys relived their hour-long ordeal, they said they were terrified and at one time did not think they would make it to the shore.

The drama happened at lunchtime yesterday in the stormy waters of the Moray Firth about a quarter mile off Ardersier.

Jonathan and Mark are schoolmates at Culloden Academy and were off school for the local holiday. They are both keen on fishing and decided to try their luck at a spot below Jonathan's house which overlooks the firth. They took his father's inflatable and rowed about 50 yards from the beach.

Jonathan said: "It was quite calm when we went out but then a wind got up. We thought it was getting a bit dangerous and we decided to turn back.

"But the wind became too strong and we started to drift down the coast. I was rowing as hard as I could but getting nowhere.

"I was really frightened and getting tired. The dinghy was too small for us to swop round and let Mark do some rowing. If we had tried we might have fallen in.

"I thought we were going to be blown right out to sea. But I just kept my mind on rowing."

Mark said he was terrified and did not think they would come out of it alive.

He said: "We were both wearing life jackets and I kept blowing the whistle and waving for help. We were both very cold and wet."

The plight of the boys was eventually noticed by Jonathan's father, a forestry officer, who immediately got in touch with the coastguard and a rescue operation was launched.

The security boat at McDermott's platform yard at Ardersier was launched and an RAF Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter was alerted.

The helicopter was first on the scene and winched aboard the two frightened boys and then their inflatable. They were landed on the beach where Mr Ogilvie and anxious friends were waiting.

The helicopter crew were: pilot Flt. Lt. Dave Simpson; Flt. Lt. John Prince, Flt. Sgt. Eric Cox and Airload Master Vic Oliver.

The boys were none the worse for their ordeal as they relaxed later. Jonathan said that they had learned their lesson and would be careful about weather conditions in the future.

Copters save 10

But man missing after Atlantic sinking

A SEAMAN was still missing in rough seas last night after eight of his shipmates were winched to safety by an RAF helicopter from RAF Lossiemouth. Two other crew members were rescued by a helicopter from a Danish frigate.

The men were all part of what is believed to be an 11-man crew who abandoned the 500-ton Icelandic cargo vessel Suderland in the North Atlantic midway between Scotland and Iceland.

The men rescued by the RAF were aboard a liferaft, which was spotted by a Nimrod from RAF Kinloss.

Them men were plucked from the raft by a Sea King helicopter, which had flown 350 miles from Lossiemouth.

They were flown 30 miles to hospital in the Faroes.

The ship radioed a mayday to Icelandic authorities shortly after 1 a.m. yesterday as it developed a 60-degree list.

The crew abandoned ship 30 miles north-west of the Faroes.

Wg. Cdr. John Bussey, of the Edunburgh Search and Rescue Co-ordination Centre, said Icelandic authorities were responsible for the area but accepted an RAF offer of help.

He said: "Conditions in the area are not good, with 20ft. waves and winds more than 50m.p.h.

The crew are all believed to be Icelandic.

Wg. Cdr. Bussey said later the missing man was the ship's boatswain, who was swept overboard while trying to launch a liferaft.

He said the sea also swept a second liferaft overboard.

But the 10 other crewmen managed to reach the second liferaft by paddling to it in a small aluminium boat aboard the ship.

Two of the men were later winched from the liferaft by a Danish helicopter.

The remaining eight, winched aboard the RAF helicopter were said to be suffering from hypothermia, but were otherwise unhurt.

Wg. Cdr. Bussey said: "The missing man was apparently wearing just jeans and a sweater. He had a lifejacket on, but it had no light or radio beacon attached to it. Things don't look terribly good for him."

He said the water temperature would probably be a maximum of 8C.

"But a man could survive many hours if he had the will to live," he said.

Reports from the scene said the ship had now sunk, he added.

The RAF planes were being joined by a US Forces search plane from Iceland.

The search for the missing man was later called off.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL FRIDAY MARCH 26 1982

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL SATURDAY MARCH 27 1982

Lossie heroes praised

Copter crew tell of 'no-snags' storm rescue mission

By ALASTAIR BISSET

THE crew of an RAF Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter spoke yesterday of the "no snags" mercy mission during which they plucked eight Icelandic seamen to safety from a liferaft in the storm-tossed North Atlantic. But the speed and success of the rescue flight — the Lossiemouth Sea King had flown the 350 miles and picked up the eight survivors within the space of three hours — brought immediate praise last night from the Icelandic authorities.

"The RAF crew from the Scottish base did a superb job," said Mr Hannes Hafstein, director of the Icelandic Lifesaving Association.

"We have been grateful to them in the past for aid rendered to Icelandic seamen and fishermen in distress. It was a remarkable achievement flying all that way and getting the men safely from the dinghy so quickly."

Only one member of the 11-man crew of the 600-ton Icelandic cargo vessel, Suderland — which sank in heavy seas 40 miles off the Faroes early on Thursday morning after its cargo of salt shifted — is still missing.

A massive air and sea search involving British and US aircraft, and ships from several nations, has failed to find the seaman. He has now been presumed drowned.

The two other Suderland crew members were picked up by a small Lynx helicopter from a Danish Frigate.

But the heroes of the rescue were the Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter crew, captained by Flt. Lt. John Prince — who had personally been on duty for 48 hours. With him on the helicopter were co-pilot Flt. Lt. Mike Lakey, radar operator Mick Headliand, and winchman Roger Whitehead.

They flew the 350 miles to reach the stricken vessel within three hours of receiving the mayday call — and 15 minutes later had plucked the eight survivors to safety.

"It was a very straightforward operation and everything went like clockwork," said Flt. Lt. Prince when he arrived back at RAF Lossiemouth yesterday afternoon.

"Weather conditions were bad — but not impossible. There were 30ft. waves, with winds gusting to more than 50 m.p.h.

"Roger went down and got them up on the winch two at a time.

"Two of the seamen were in pretty bad shape, obviously suffering from hypothermia, so we immediately flew them the 40 miles to hospital at Thorshaven."

The Suderland had put out its mayday call at 1 a.m. on Thursday. Their liferaft was first spotted by a Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft from RAF Kinloss, which subsequently guided the Lossiemouth helicopter to the rescue spot.

THE RAF Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter crew (left to right): Winchman Roger Whitehead; Fl. Lt. John Prince; radar operator Mick Headliand, and Ft. Lt. Mike Lakey.

Dimly, through stinging, water-filled eyes, he was aware of a shape hanging in the sky above him and, as though from afar, he heard the rhythmic clamour of a helicopter. Though consciousness was fast receding, he managed a feeble wave of his arm.

But no one came—no winchman twisting down towards him on the end of the wire to pluck him from the sea. Just the helicopter sitting

THE SUNDAY EXPRESS February 13 1983

'The bloody cable's gone!' cried Reeson over the intercom

above, battering the waves with its downwash.

Why didn't some bastard help him?

Then there was only blackness and silence.

THE British Airways Wessex helicopter, for that was what it was, could not help Olsen. For it was not equipped with a winch.

Flying in the vicinity, it had responded to the American's "Mayday," but its civilian crew were powerless to do any more than keep vigil over the struggling figure in the water and wait for the RAF to arrive.

As Bellingall's Sea King approached, the Wessex wheeled thankfully out of the way to give him a clear run over the lonely figure floating on its back in the outflung pose of a crucified man.

The RAF machine tried to hover over Olsen — only for her crew to see him disappear from sight as his gale-filled parachute dragged him backwards.

John Reeson, like a bus conductor clinging to the platform rail to help his driver reverse, hung out of the starboard door giving instructions to the pilots.

"Back ten . . . back ten . . . back ten . . . right a bit . . . a bit more . . . back ten. . . ."

Blindly, totally reliant on Reeson, the men at the controls flew backwards at a height of 40ft, keeping station above the American pilot. To their astonishment their rough calculations showed that he was being pulled through the water at *between 12 and 14 knots!*

If he wasn't dead already he soon would be unless they fished him to safety quickly.

And that meant that Dave Bullock had to go down for him.

Experienced though he was, the 38-year-old Caithness man knew it would be no picnic; that he, too, would take an awful battering in those violent, icy seas.

Normally the joker of the crew, he was, for once, quiet as he volunteered to be lowered into the water.

As he went over the side, John Reeson, operating the winch control beside the cargo door, watched his progress.

"The seas were rough," he recalls, "but Dave managed to get the man and hang on to him. The parachute was dragging them both through the water at a hell of a pace and I was having to give constant instructions to the pilots so we could stay above them.

"Dave clipped his harness to the American's harness and tried to cut through the parachute shrouds. Trouble was half the canopy was in the water. So those shrouds were slack, just floating about under the surface. The part of the canopy that was clear of the water was inflated. So *those* shrouds were taut.

"Dave was trying to get a knife on the slack ones. Once he'd cut through those, the taut ones would be no great problem—one cut with the knife and they'd part, then I'd be able to winch them both up.

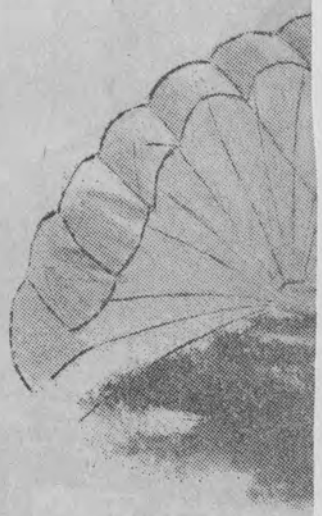
"Dave's difficulty, in the middle of all the waves and spray, was that he couldn't see the shrouds floating in the water. He kept trying to grab them, but they were just waving about out of his sight under the surface.

"So then he gave a hand signal, telling me to winch him just clear of the water, and I knew he wanted lifting a few feet so he could get a better view of where the shrouds were."

Obediently Reeson talked the pilots down to about 15ft above the sea, then nudged the winch switch into the "Up" position.

The two fliers, Scot and American, came out of the water. But so, too, did the accursed parachute canopy, filling instantly with wind and billowing up towards the Sea King's tail rotor. Had it become enmeshed with the spinning blades it would have dragged the helicopter out of the sky.

"You could almost hear the cable humming it was so taut," Reeson says. "As fast as I could, I unwound the cable to dump them back in the sea and take the weight off the cable."



But the strain had proved too much.

The twisted steel fibres began to part and, with a suddenness that rocked the Sea King in the air the cable broke and the two men were pitched back into the water.

"The bloody cable's gone!" Reeson's anguished voice roared over the intercom.

He saw Bullock inflate his lifejacket with its carbon dioxide cylinder and then he and the American were momentarily dragged out of sight as a fresh gust of wind filled the parachute like a sail, tacking them off at a tangent.

Swearing monotonously to himself, the distraught winch operator reeled in the broken wire and spliced a lead weight to its ragged end. His intention was to lower the weight on to the parachute canopy to deflate it—but it just bounced off.

Frantically the pilots pushed their craft backwards, trying to keep station above

Bullock tried desperately to cut the shrouds.

their crewmate and the American to whom he had clipped himself.

Despite his own appalling predicament, Bullock continued to try to keep the colonel's head out of the water, fighting for the other man's life as vigorously as he was fighting for his own.

Reeson grabbed one of the Sea King's emergency dinghies and chucked it over the side. It landed close to the two men. But, driven by the howling wind, it tore past them with the pace of a speedboat. "Even if Dave had managed to catch hold it was travelling so fast it would have pulled his arm out of its socket," says Reeson.

The intercom was busy as the three remaining crewmen discussed—and rejected—a number of desperate measures to try to save their friend.

Shove another dinghy over the side? No, they already had proof that the wind could carry it away.

Land on the sea? Though a Sea King is capable of floating, it would quickly capsize in such heavy seas, almost certainly killing the five men aboard.

Should Reeson go over the side and try to swim to the two men? But what then? With no means of winching him back aboard, that option was certain suicide.

Gradually the intercom fell silent. There was nothing left to say. Within seconds of the winch cable snapping they had radioed for help; all they could do was wait for it to arrive.

With a feeling of helplessness and profound sadness John Reeson watched his friend's weakening struggles as he and the American were pulled through the whitecaps, often obliterated from sight by breaking water.

He had been Bullock's instructor when the latter had gone through the Search and Rescue Training Unit at RAF Valley in Anglesey.

Many a night they had swapped pints of beer and stories in the sergeants' mess.

Bullock had always been the live-wire who could raise a smile even at the most tense moments—yet good at his job, a hard and willing worker.

Now all Reeson could do was stand and watch him die.

Numbly he watched the winchman's struggles grow feebler until they stopped altogether.

He and the American began rolling over in the water like those metal spinners used by anglers to lure fish.

Then Reeson knew they were both dead.

THE bodies were recovered by paramedics aboard a USAF CH53 "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter — Bullock first, then Olsen. By then they had been dragged a further five miles by the parachute.

As the Sea King escorted the big American machine towards an emergency landing ground near Norwich hospital, her crew received the confirmation they were dreading to hear.

"Both survivors are Delta," came an American voice over the VHF.

The RAF men were in no mood for codes. "What?" asked Adrian Nockles, the second pilot.

"Dead. Both dead," was the reply.

AFTER they'd written out the inevitable reports back at Coltishall, after an officer had been despatched to break the terrible news to Bullock's wife, Pat, at her home in Aylesham, Bellingall and his crew were sent off duty.

Adrian Nockles, the youngest member, arrived home, still unable to accept that a man he had been talking to an hour before was dead.

His wife, Anna, was suffering from flu. "Come on," he told her. "We're going to the pub." Puzzled, she slipped on her coat.

Only when he had drunk a large Scotch, then chased it with a couple more, did he tell the story of that terrible morning.

"When I'd drunk too much for my own good I went home and keeled over in bed," he recalls. "I'm not the sort of person who breaks down with grief; getting drunk was my way of clearing it from my mind."

THE following August Master Air Loadmaster David Edward Bullock, the first RAF winchman to be killed during a rescue, was posthumously awarded the George Medal for gallantry.

The citation said: "Despite the unique and considerable difficulties created by the inflated parachute he calmly went about the business of attempting to recover the pilot of the helicopter as quickly and as safely as possible.

"He was close to success when the cable broke. Well aware of the very dangerous situation created by this catastrophic turn of events, he had every opportuniy over a period of three or four minutes to disconnect himself from the pilot and save his own life.

"However, consciously, and with conspicuous courage, he chose to remain with the pilot in the hope of saving him."

NEXT WEEK: Trapped in a capsized barge

THE SUNDAY EXPRESS February 13 1983

Olsen's parachute had saved his life...now it looked like killing him

Beginning a new series that records some of the courageous exploits of the air-sea rescue crews.

by JOHN BEATTIE

JINKING and weaving like a brace of startled snipe the two olive-green aircraft howled across the wintry flatlands of Norfolk.

Weird, ugly craft, the U.S. Air Force A-10 Thunderbolts had none of the streamlined grace of the modern warplane.

But then the Thunderbolt is no high-performance interceptor, no slim, dart-like fighter.

Designated a close-support aircraft, it is, in truth, a flying tank—a slow-moving, heavily-armoured gun platform created to wreak havoc with enemy ground forces with its seven-barrelled cannon spitting shells at the rate of 4,200 a minute.

It has all the grace of a flying privy. But its lumpy 53ft airframe, with its H-shaped tail and two 9,065lb-thrust turbofan engines bolted on to the fuselage, is designed to absorb murderous ground fire and still stay aloft.

These two were from Bentwaters USAF base near Ipswich, Suffolk, flying northwards towards the Wash on a routine training mission.

Flying at their combat speed of a little more than 400 miles an hour, they twisted along in the peculiar corkscrewing technique evolved for the A-10 to throw ground gunners off their aim and to enable each pilot to keep a watch on his comrade's tail.

Now they were nearing the Wash, just about to overfly the village of Itteringham. It was a few minutes past 9 o'clock on the morning of Tuesday, December 18, 1980.

They were still twisting, pulling towards each other, then turning to veer apart. But this time they had got it wrong. This time they were closing with horrendous suddenness.

In desperation the pilots slammed their controls hard over in the opposite direction, each reefing back on his stick to escape from that fast-narrowing gap.

A split second more and they might have done it—escaped with nothing more than a moment's terror, something to grin ruefully about over a beer in the officers' club.

But though both machines were standi - on end with their 57ft wingspans pointing vertically, engines howling to shove them outwards away from one another, there was to be no escape.

A shuddering jar, felt rather than heard, shook both aircraft as they slammed together. Like billiard balls colliding they hit belly to belly and cannoned off in opposite directions. Duralmin debris fluttered behind them as feathers fly from a shot partridge.

From the cockpit of one appeared a brief sunburst flare as the pilot yanked the firing handle of his ejector seat and was flung clear, a dark, tumbling blob against the November sky.

As the stunned villagers watched the blob resolve itself into the shape of a man, above which a parachute blossomed to life, the aircraft cartwheeled into the ground and erupted in a ball of fire.

The second Thunderbolt was still airborne—hurt, but capable of flight. Instinctively, like a wounded bird, it turned for home, wheeling out over the North Sea before heading south for Bentwaters.

At the controls was Lieutenant-Colonel William Olsen. Though qualified to fly the Thunderbolt, he was currently serving a ground tour as an operations officer.

That day's sortie had included him so that he could keep his hand in with a couple of hours' flying.

Once clear of the land, travelling parallel with the coastline over angry waves whipped by a Force Eight gale, Olsen gingerly tested his controls.

Rudder, elevators and ailerons—all seemed to be working properly. The engines sounded healthy enough; none of the instruments was showing a warning or behaving abnormally. He had, it

The two planes collided belly to belly — and Olsen's companion ejected.

seemed, escaped astonishingly unscathed from what, in most cases, would have been a fatal mid-air collision.

As the battered Thunderbolt howled down the East Anglian coast, Olsen prepared for one final test—to see if he could lower the undercarriage.

If not, if the doors to the wheel bays had been so badly buckled by the impact that the landing gear would not go down, then it was pointless completing the 50-mile flight to Bentwaters. For a wheels-up landing in a jet aircraft is normally a short cut to death or serious injury.

Better by far to head over land, point the A-10's nose towards the empty sea, and "bang out" with the ejector seat as his now safe, if shaken, companion had done.

The colonel selected "wheels down" on his cockpit control, his eyes anxiously scanning the instrument panel for the three green lights that would tell him his gear was down and locked.

Behind him and below, deep in her innards, the aircraft flexed her powerful hydraulic muscles and, groaning like a woman contracting in labour, pushed downwards against the resistance of her damaged underbelly.

Hesitantly, the buckled doors slanted open to make way for the unfolding undercarriage legs. But as the landing gear angled down it opened a hidden wound in a damaged hydraulic pipe.

The wound became a gaping split. Dark hydraulic fluid gushed forth as blood will pour from a severed vein and the aircraft began to die.

In the cockpit Olsen felt his flying controls, all hydraulic powered, stiffen beneath his hands and feet as the vital fluid bled from the system.

Within seconds rigor mortis had set in. The controls were immoveably locked. Using all his strength, he could not budge them.

Calmly he tightened the straps that attached him to the ejector seat and radioed a final "Mayday" call to enable listeners on the ground to get a fix on his position.

Now he would have to take his chances in the sea, for there was no possibility of reaching land, but with luck a rescue helicopter would be on the way already and would winch him to safety within minutes.

Colonel Olsen reached for the firing handle of his ejector seat. . . .

IT WAS 9.28 a.m. and the crew room of C Flight, 202 Squadron on the edge of the airfield at RAF Coltishall, was crowded as the duty helicopter crews prepared for a shift change.

Bellingall's crew was due to hand over to the newcomers in two minutes, but servicemen are not clockwatchers and a shift change usually tended to blur into a few minutes of chat over coffee and cigarettes.

"Want some coffee, Jim?" Dave Bullock, the winchman, asked Bellingall. Though the latter was a flight lieutenant and Bullock only a master air loadmaster (aircrew warrant officer), such easy familiarity is normal in the close-knit world of search-and-rescue helicopters.

Before Bellingall could answer, the "squawk box" echoed tinnily through the smoke-filled room.

For the "squawk box" was the intercom link between air traffic control and C Flight's modest operations room.

Bellingall's winch operator, Master Air Electronics Operator John Reeson, flicked over a red key beside the loudspeaker. "Yes?"

It was hard to decipher the message for several people were talking at once close to the man in air traffic who was speaking to Reeson.

The burly winch operator frowned with concentration as he sought to unravel what was being said. Satisfied that he had understood he gave a terse "Roger" and clicked the switch off.

"Mid - air collision," he announced. "Two Yanks have hit each other near Itteringham. One's exploded — the other may still be flying."

Coffee and shift change forgotten, the two crews busied themselves — Jim Bellingall and his men for immediate take-off; the fresh crew on readiness in case they, too, might be scrambled.

Minutes later six men streamed out of the door of the crew room and, bending into a 45 miles an hour wind that buffeted off the sea, ran for the waiting yellow Sea King helicopter.

Into the captain's seat on the right of the flight deck went Bellingall. His second pilot, 28-year-old Flight Lieutenant Adrian Nockles, took the other seat.

Behind them, in a curtained section containing radar and radios, was Reeson, the winch operator, while further aft Dave Bullock helped to make their two passengers—a medical officer and fireman in a flame-proof suit—comfortable.

The Sea King's twin Gnome jets shrieked to a crescendo and the ungainly five-and-a-half ton machine lifted upwards from the old Battle of Britain airfield towards the fast-scudding clouds.

At an air speed of 130 miles an hour the helicopter clattered across the flat Norfolk landscape towards the distant plume of oily black smoke, quickly shredded by the gale, that marked the grave of the Thunderbolt that had crashed at Itteringham.

But that was not to be their objective. With little more than two minutes to fly before reaching Itteringham, fresh instructions came over the radio.

Bellingall and his crew must turn east and search for the second pilot who had now also ditched. The second Sea King had been scrambled to pick up the pilot who had baled out over land.

Bellingall's job was to hunt the grey wastes of the North Sea for a tiny scrap of humanity — and find him before the crashing waves and freezing temperatures snuffed out his life.

OLSEN choked and gagged as a breaking wave forced salt water into his nose and mouth. He came up gasping for air but the sea's terrible cold squeezed every breath out of his body.

He was stunned and disoriented after the traumatic mule-kick of ejection and the shock of hitting the water. The parachute which had saved his life was now threatening to kill him.

Unable to free himself of its harness, its canopy inflated by the gale, he was being dragged along headfirst through the 10ft waves at terrifying speed.

His helmet, along with his one-man dinghy, had been snatched away during the nightmare of ejection. The top of his head was creating a bow wave, that broke constantly over his face as he planed through the water like a child's puppet trailing on the end of its strings.

Sometimes the parachute canopy deflated and his mad-cap progress through the water eased, but then another gust of wind would take it, jerking him into motion again.

Unlike the RAF flyer whose parachute harness clicks into a drum-like metal box over his midriff and which can quickly be released by a turn of the face-plate and a sharp fist blow, the American airman's parachute is fitted with devices called Koch fasteners.

One is attached to each shoulder harness. On each buckle are two spring-loaded buttons which must be squeezed between thumb and forefinger to free the wearer from his 'chute, a straightforward enough procedure under normal circumstances.

But subject the buckles to strain, try to squeeze the buttons together when they are carrying weight and it's like trying to unravel a knot in a taut rope. So the more tension on the fastenings, the stronger your fingers and thumbs must be to operate the release mechanism.

That was Colonel Olsen's problem. The force eight gale that was dragging his parachute eastwards was exerting a fearful pressure on the Koch fasteners. Despite squeezing the buttons with all his strength they wouldn't move. It was as though they had been welded in place.

Now he was weakening fast, retching and fighting for every breath as the runaway parachute trawled him through the water, jerking him, not over the wave crests, but through them.

An eerie mumbling was broken by the sobbing of a man

scared, I had no idea which way to go or what lay ahead. The one thought that kept coming back to me was that once I got inside I wouldn't be able to find my way out again.

"I made myself take a few slow, deep breaths and remember saying to myself, 'Look, you shouldn't be working as a diver if you're not up to it.'

"That helped a bit. So I went in a few more feet and let myself begin to drift upwards."

It took almost every ounce of willpower he possessed, and much courage, to enter that black and fearsome chamber.

His heart thudded as he ascended, rising slowly towards the compartment's deck through a tangle of unidentifiable jetsam that bumped and moved through the black water as the doomed barge stirred in the waves and current.

After what seemed like an hour or two, but was probably only a few minutes, he felt his hands growing warm. Why, he wondered, should one layer of water be warmer than another?

TRAPPED

Of course! The answer was simple; his hands were no longer in water — they were reaching out into the pocket of trapped air. He rose another couple of feet and felt his head break the surface.

Somehow he had expected to be able to see something, if only the dimmest loom of light once he was out of the water. But though he trod water, turning himself through a full 360 degrees, the oppressive blackness was still unremitting. It pressed down on him with an almost physical force.

But he was still able to hear. As he swallowed hard to relieve the pressure on his eardrums the sound came to him — an eerie mumbling occasionally broken by the soft, wretched sobbing of a man who has been pushed close to the limits of human endurance.

With his own fear abating, if only slightly, the diver felt a stab of pity for the terror-stricken sailor clinging on to life in that pocket. God alone knew what fear and horror he had lived through since the barge had turned turtle. Small wonder that he whimpered to himself in what seemed certain to become his tomb.

When Spencer spoke his voice was low and soothing, as though speaking to a hurt child. For he was fearful that the shock of hearing another human would galvanise Devereux, flinging him through the water, possibly drowning the two of them, certainly barging the rescuer away from the spot he knew was directly above the only known route to safety.

"Hello, mate. You're going to be all right. No—don't move. Stay where you are and listen to what I say. . . ."

Willing the man to remain still he explained the situation, realising as he spoke that what he was about to say would test the other's courage, perhaps beyond what could be expected of anyone. For if there was to be any chance of saving him, he would have to leave him alone to his nightmare yet again.

Though the descent to the door was a comparatively short one it would seem like an eternity in that blackness to a man with only one lungful of air to keep him going. Any delay—a wrong turn or obstruction — would bring panic. Almost certainly that would be fatal for Devereux and, caught in the clutches of a drowning man, for Spencer himself.

". . . so I'm going to have to go back up top and get you a set of breathing apparatus," he went on. "I'll be right back. Just a few minutes, that's all—I promise you."

THERE was a long silence as Devereux weighed his words. First he had known despair, the near certainty of a miserable, choking death. Then hope had come. Now, for a time, that hope was to be snatched away. In that time the air pocket could exhaust itself, or the barge sink.

In that moment of crushing disappointment, with only his head and shoulders clear of the water in the finite reservoir of air, Steve Devereux discovered his own brand of courage.

"Yes—I'll wait," he said, his voice husky but steady. "But for Christ's sake be as quick as you can. The water's rising all the time. It won't last long."

Spencer hacked himself free with his knife

"I'll be back in a jiffy," Spencer answered with a reassurance he didn't feel. For it was plain to him that the barge was gradually settling deeper in the water.

His downward swim seemed to last for ever, but at last there was a feeble hint of murky light ahead. He finned through the doorway and up to the surface.

"I've found him!" he gasped to "Bomber" Brown. "But he needs a breathing set—that's the only way I'm going to get him out. Can you give us a hand? There's not room for two of us in there, but you could follow me in and pass the spare set to me."

Without a word Brown tucked a BASAR under his arm and slid off the hull into the water. Spencer led the way, grateful for the older man's foresight in suggesting that he should tie a rope to the door as a guideline. For it led them straight to their goal.

Spencer led the way, striking upwards through the blackness with Brown hanging on to his leg. When his head broke clear of the water he felt downwards with his left arm, grasping the BASAR that the chief petty officer passed up to him from his position beneath Spencer's flippers.

There was an audible gasp of relief when the diver spoke. "Told you I wouldn't hang about, mate. Now I've got a breathing set for you. What I want you to do is come slowly towards me. I'll keep talking and you come towards the sound . . . but slowly, mind you."

He felt the movement in the water as the man forged towards him.

He went on: "Everything's switched on and ready for you. I've got the mouthpiece in my hand; all you've got to do is feel for it and stick it between your teeth."

A cold hand fastened over his own and the mouthpiece was plucked from his grasp. A moment later he heard the rhythmic in-out hissing as Devereux began to take air. By feel and guesswork he helped thread the harness over the other's shoulders.

There was an eruption in the water beside him as "Bomber" Brown surfaced. "Hurry up, Spence," he urged. "Let's —— off quickly. I'll grab his legs and pull him down; you follow us.

"By the way," he added conversationally, "I hope you know you've been standing on my bloody head for the last ten minutes."

Spencer forced himself to wait in that claustrophobic darkness as his two companions sank beneath the surface, willing himself to remain still until he estimated they had reached the door. Only then, and with a profound sense of relief, did he begin to follow.

But his head was barely submerged before he found himself in trouble.

Something was blocking his path. *For Christ's sake. . . .* He forced his way past it, only to be fetched up short again as he entangled himself with the rungs of a ladder floating with the other debris. He seemed to be surrounded by nameless objects that were bumping against him, impeding him, trying to trap him.

He cursed and sweated, thrashing, punching and kicking in total blackness as a rising tide of panic threatened to engulf him.

Then training took over—the text books, the lectures and the practice dives. "Bomber," he knew, would never leave him. He stopped struggling and surfaced again, removing his mouthpiece to conserve his oxygen supply.

He bobbed about sightlessly and, after two or three minutes, one leg appeared to be free of obstructions.

Sod it, I'll give it another crack.

Mouthpiece back in place he ducked under the surface for the second time. The underwater rubbish dump was still there, but now the barrier seemed less impenetrable. Ignoring the bumps and scrapes against his legs and arms, he forced his way downwards.

Suddenly the water was unobstructed and he was swimming with all his strength towards the blessed, murky rectangle of light that was his road to salvation.

His head bobbed clear of the Solent just in time to see the Wessex winching the man he had saved out of the waves for the short flight to the nearest Royal Navy hospital.

"Bomber" Brown smiled wearily as he trod water beside the settling barge, trying to deflate the life jacket he had inflated to speed the progress of Devereux and himself to the surface.

"Thank Christ you're here, Spence," he called. "Well done, lad, well done."

John Spencer grinned back, suddenly jubilant at their achievement. Then he turned and dived again, for he had one more task to complete.

When he had freed the clips on the door he had jammed the mallet behind one of the hinges for safe keeping; the guide rope was still lashed to the door handle — both signed-for articles on the Wessex's inventory.

He was damned if he would leave them where they were. Somehow, after all the dramas of that morning, he couldn't bring himself to mess about completing all the official bumf that would be neccessary to write them off.

SOON after the epic rescue that freed Steve Devereux after 105 minutes of purgatory, other paperwork was working its way through the Navy's official channels.

Marked "Staff in Confidence," it was a citation chronicling Spencer's extraordinary heroism . . . and in July, 1981, he found himself lined up with other heroes at Buckingham Palace, waiting to receive the Queen's Gallantry Medal.

A little more than a year later he was back at the Palace, this time to receive a bar to his QGM and thus become the first member of the Royal Navy to be presented with the medal twice.

It was awarded for his rescue, by helicopter winch, of an 18-month-old baby, a woman and two deck hands from a badly listing ship in appalling storms off Portland Bill on December 13, 1981.

Once again John Spencer had known the grip of fear; once again at great personal risk he had overcome that fear to do his duty.

NEXT WEEK: The horror of a blazing ship

HELICOPTER HEROES

'We can hear him knocking on the hull,' said the tug-man

by JOHN BEATTIE

SHROUDED by squalls of rain, the long barge trailed reluctantly through the uneasy seas behind the tug, dragging with mulish obstinacy at the stout, steel towline.

It was an uncomfortable ride for the two-man crew of the wallowing barge. A stiff breeze brought a chill to the air and whipped the waters of the Solent into a steep-sided chop of waves peaking six feet and more. The lumbering craft's slow progress was in an uneasy corkscrewing motion.

Feet braced wide apart in the rudimentary wheelhouse, the barge's helmsman, John Henderson, spun the wheel first one way then the other as he juggled to keep the towline straight and taut between the two vessels.

Below, in the cramped galley, 40-year-old Steve Devereux tried to cope with sliding pans and spoons as he set about cooking a scratch lunch for himself and Henderson.

No easy job. The old cow of a barge drew little draught and would have rolled on a wet sponge. In the narrow channel between the Isle of Wight and the Hampshire coast where the waters were confused by myriad cross currents, she reeled about like a drunk.

He glanced at his watch—a little after 11 a.m.; the date, Friday October 10th, 1980 . . . then swore as he grabbed for a wayward saucepan that threatened to dive over the edge of the stove.

The tug—the Craigleath—led the way towards the narrowest part of the Solent, the half-mile wide bottleneck between the Hampshire peninsula of Hurst Castle and the Isle of Wight's Colwell Bay.

AWKWARD

Here the seas were even more unpredictable and Henderson, despite the cold, was working up a sweat as he wound the helm on and off to keep station behind the Craigleath

An awkward wave pattern shouldered the barge's bows sideways. Henderson slammed on opposite rudder, but the 80ft long craft was sluggish in its response and continued to sheer off course, rolling off at a tangent from the ship's wake, the towline slackening and dipping into the sea.

As the helmsman fought to bring her head round, Craigleath's forward motion once more took up the slack and like a giant bowstring the shivering, dripping hawser was drawn bow-taut.

But the barge was still several points off course and the savage jerk against her bows made her heel viciously. Hunching over, she began to crab through the water with waves breaking clear over her dipped rails. Still she refused to answer to her rudder. The pull of the towline was remorseless.

The list grew more pronounced and a horrified John Henderson found himself slipping down deckplates that were inexorably becoming a wall. He yelled hoarsely to his mate in the galley. *"Steve! Get out of there, for God's sake. The bugger's going over. I can't hold her."*

But by then it was too late and a bewildered Henderson whirled out through the wheelhouse door, cartwheeling over the rail into the numbing cold of the Solent. Gasping for air and choking on brine, he surfaced in time to witness, with stunned disbelief, the closing moments of the catastrophe as the barge rolled slowly on to her back like a dying iron whale.

"Steve! Steve!" he shouted desperately as he trod water. But there was no reply . . . only the thunder of the waves.

In the galley, deafened by the crash of tumbling pans and splintering crockery, wildly disorientated by the compartment's steady rotation through 180 degrees, Steve Devereux grabbed for something steady to hold on to, found nothing and tumbled helplessly downwards.

Slithering in a mess of spilled food, sprawling among sharp shards of pottery and glass, he struggled to find his equilibrium. His reeling brain was, for a moment, unable to accept the evidence of his eyes—the fact that the compartment was upside down; that the deckhead light which, only seconds before, had been above his head was now beneath his feet.

Even as he looked at it, the bulb dimmed and flickered out, plunging the galley into total darkness.

Then, with a terrifying roar, the water burst in. . . .

THE call for help to the search and rescue unit came at 11.20 a.m. on Channel Zero, the coastguards' radio frequency.

Lieutenant Bill Sample, RN, and his two-man Wessex crew of the SAR Unit at HMS Daedalus, Lee-on-Solent, were waiting as the ground crew pumped aviation kerosene into the underfloor fuel tanks to replace the 800lb they had just burned up on a routine training flight.

Ian Weston, a petty officer, sat at the radio and radar complex in the aftercabin. Behind him, leaning out of the starboard door to ensure no one walked into the whirling nine-foot disc of the tail rotor, was the baby of the crew — 24-year-old Acting Leading Aircrewman John Spencer.

In the perspex canopy, set on the Wessex's bulbous snout, Lieutenant Sample lounged in the right-hand pilot's seat, keeping the two Gnome jets burning and turning.

Barge under tow has overturned off Hurst Castle near the Needles, came the coastguard's message. *Two men believed to be in the water. We urgently request an SAR helicopter search.*

UPDATED

As refuelling finished, Sample opened his throttles. Within seconds the five-ton Wessex had lifted itself off the wet tarmac and was clopping along at 130 miles an hour for the Needles.

In the 13ft. cabin John Spencer listened intently and nervously to updated radio reports—one man had been rescued from the sea by the tug's crew. The other was believed trapped—surviving in a pocket of air inside the overturned barge.

"What made me nervous was the realisation that I was about to face my first diving rescue," says Spencer, now a petty officer at Yeovilton, Somerset.

"I'd done winch rescue before and, of course, had completed a course of diving training, but this was to be the first time I would dare to dive for real."

Eleven minutes and 17 miles later the ungainly blue and orange helicopter was hanging in the gusty breeze above the whaleback hump of the sinking barge's keel.

Standing on the hump, waving frantically to the rescue machine, was a member of Craigleath's crew.

In the cabin door of the aircraft John Spencer waited apprehensively, trussed in his wet suit and BASAR (breathing apparatus search and rescue), alert for the signal that would send him plunging into the muddy churning waters 15ft below.

Permission to dispatch the diver, sir? Petty Officer Weston asked the formal question into the intercom with punctilious correctness. The reply was in the affirmative and he tapped Spencer twice on the shoulder.

When the signal came, the young diver took a deep breath and jumped.

The icy shock came like a physical blow as he plunged beneath the waves. Involuntarily he sucked in a lungful of oxygen and kicked for the surface. As he swam for the barge he heard the clamour of the helicopter retreating in the distance. (Later he discovered it had returned to Daedalus for more divers.)

As his hands touched the cold metal of the barge he shouted up to the tug-man standing there. "Where is he, then?"

"He's in the accommodation compartment," came the reply. "We can hear him knocking on the hull."

"How do I get in?"

"The entrance is on the starboard side—back towards the stern somewhere."

Spencer acknowledged with a wave and ducked beneath the waves—and was immediately almost blinded. The storm had stirred up so much muck from the seabed that he could see no further than a foot in front of his face mask.

Largely by feel, he began to make his way down the starboard side until his hands grasped the gunwale rails. He ducked underneath them and groped his way towards the stern superstructure.

He felt with his finger ends along weld seams and rivet heads, searching for a door or hatch, an opening of any sort that might lead him to the trapped wretch inside.

There! His outstretched

The young diver jumped into the sea alongside the upturned barge

hands encountered a gap and traced its outline. It was a doorway. Slowly and with mounting apprehension he swam into it.

Immediately the small amount of visibility he had had outside vanished. Not a glimmer of light relieved the blackness.

FOR long, anxious moments he hung still in the water, forcing himself to summon up the courage to explore further into the unknown. With a conscious effort he slowed his breathing to a slow, steady rhythm—panicky gasps would only empty his air bottles more quickly.

Come on, Spence — this is for real, he told himself. *There's some poor sod stuck in there waiting for you.*

Cautiously he finned his way into the compartment, slowly waving his hands in front of him like antennae, and began to swim upwards. His fingers brushed against something cold and oval-shaped that was hanging down from the upturned deck. He scrabbled at it, totally mystified about what it might be. He pushed his head forward until his eyes were a couple of inches away—he couldn't see a damned thing.

He grinned weakly to himself as he finally identified the mystery object. It was a lavatory bowl: obviously he was in the heads. There would, he reasoned, be only one entrance—the one he had come through—so a further exploration was unnecessary.

Unseeingly, he felt his way back outside. Hand over hand he fended himself across the front of the bridge superstructure to explore the port side—and was suddenly cursing and fighting to free himself as he blundered into a tangle of ropes hanging like vines from the deck. He hacked himself free with his aircrew knife.

The search of the port side proved fruitless. Though he tracked back and forth for several minutes he found no opening. Disappointedly, and acutely conscious that time was precious, he struggled back through the spaghetti of ropes to the starboard side.

This time he ignored the entrance to the heads and kept going, angling round the corner of the superstructure until he was on the rear wall of the bridge.

There, almost immediately, he discovered a door and swam through, back once more in a world totally without light. His fingers brushed against something which he grabbed and identified as the ship's wheel.

He gave a grunt of satisfaction. Surely, he reasoned, there must be a companionway from the wheelhouse to the living accommodation; now it was only a matter of time before he discovered it.

Talking of time . . . he peered at the luminous dial of his waterproof watch and noted with astonishment that he had been under water for half an hour.

"Although I'd tried to control my breathing, being scared I had obviously used more than I thought I had," he recalls. "I'd emptied one cylinder. So I decided to go back to the surface to get a new supply."

He swam to the surface and was gladdened to see that the Wessex had returned, bringing fresh air bottles and two more divers who were now standing on the hull beside the seaman from Craigleath. He recognised them as Chief Aircrewman Dave "Bomber" Brown, head of Spencer's section, and Chris Crossley, another trained diver. They dragged him on to the hull.

"Do you want me to go down with you, Spence?" Brown asked as the young diver shrugged his way into the straps of a new pair of oxygen bottles.

"No, I've begun to find my way round a bit—but I do want a word with this civvie to see if he can help me find a bloody way in. It's as black as the ace of spades down there."

Rapidly he explained to the Craigleath man that he had found the entrance to the wheelhouse; and received the welcome news that the door to the accommodation section was right next to it.

He jumped back into the water and quickly found the door he was seeking. But it was jammed shut, locked by metal clips which refused to budge when he tried to turn them.

He cursed in the flat tones of his native Nottingham and tried again, fighting against the drag of a strong current that was pushing him from the door.

Amazing, isn't it? Nothing's bloody easy. . . .

He swam back to the surface and called for a hammer. Brown passed him a mallet, then said: "Here, Spence, take this as well and tie it to the door. It'll be a guide for us if we have to come after you." The diver took the proffered rope end and submerged again.

BACK at the door he hitched the rope to the handle and kicking hard with his flippers to counter the drag of the current swung the mallet in a slow-motion thump against the metal clip.

It didn't budge a centimetre. Spencer took a harder swing, then another and another, gritting his teeth and breathing hard at his precious oxygen supply.

Three minutes, four, five, he flailed at the stubborn clip as hot sweat trickled down his body inside the wet suit. But slowly the locking device was moving.

With a muffled clang it shifted . . . then Spencer was wrestling with the heavy steel door, struggling to open it against the heavy press of the current.

He gave a last mighty heave and slammed it back against the wall and waited a few moments to get his breath back after his exertions.

With a return of his earlier feelings of foreboding and his mind busy with disturbing images of being lost or trapped inside a sinking hulk, he floated in through the doorway.

"I had really serious doubts about going ahead," he admits. "Somehow it seemed even more pitch black than before. I felt my way in and could see absolutely nothing. It was just as if someone had put my eyes out.

"I was scared — really

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'Sod this for a lark,' yelled Bragg. 'Winch me back in...'

By JOHN BEATTIE

IT WAS a terrible landing in atrocious weather. The British Airways Trident Flight 5638 from Heathrow, ballooned on to the runway at Inverness Airport with a force that shook and frightened its passengers.

Out of the rain-drenched blackness runway lights flashed by at dizzy speed as the pilot fought the savagely gusting wind to hold his machine on the ground and in a straight line.

In tourist class, Mike Lakey, an experienced pilot himself, gripped the arms of his seat as the aircraft bucketed down the wet concrete, braking fiercely. From his fellow passengers came gasps and murmurs of fear.

Lakey, a serving flight lieutenant in the RAF, relaxed his grip as he felt the brakes biting. Mercifully the juddering airliner began to slow. . .

An RAF staff car was waiting outside the arrivals lounge to take him home after a round trip to London to attend a Press conference at which it had been announced that he and his helicopter crew were to receive an award from the Duke of Edinburgh for rescuing survivors from the ill-fated oil rig Alexander Kielland which had capsized in North Sea storms in March 1980.

Mike Lakey is a shy, reticent man and that Press conference on Thursday, October 2, 1980, had been almost as much of an ordeal as the spectacular rescue seven months earlier.

Now, as the car pulled up outside his married quarters at RAF Lossiemouth, Morayshire, he thanked his stars that he was off duty and would not have to fly again on that stormy night.

He was glad to be home and was looking forward to a quiet supper with his wife, Elizabeth, while he recounted to her his day in London and told her about that bloody awful landing at Inverness.

Less than ten minutes later the telephone rang—and Mrs Lakey found herself eating supper alone. . .

THE alarm had been raised by the coastguard station in Orkney after they had received a garbled "Mayday" call from the heart of a titanic storm that was howling through the Atlantic 50 miles north-west of Orkney.

In 70ft waves, blasted by winds gusting at more than 75 miles an hour, a ship was on fire after heavy seas had smashed chemical containers and lead-acid batteries stored on her weatherdeck.

The two combined to produce an explosive cocktail and within minutes the ship's centre section was burning like a blowtorch.

Aboard were 22 crew, including two women and two children.

Lossiemouth had immediately launched its duty search and rescue Sea King helicopter, call-sign Rescue 37. With a crew of four she was ploughing doggedly northwards into the teeth of the hurricane.

The telephone call to Lakey's home had been from his friend Flight Lieutenant Bill Campbell, who was "minding the shop" in 202 Squadron's crewroom at Lossiemouth. It had firmly placed responsibility on the shoulders of 32-year-old Flight Lieutenant Lakey who, in the absence of his C.O., was acting flight commander.

"It looks bad, Mike," said Campbell "Should we rustle up a second crew in case they're needed?"

Lakey didn't hesitate. "Yes—do that, Bill," he replied. "I'll go and collect Rick from his quarters and bring him in if you'll try to find Dave. Have an aircraft standing by and I'll be there as soon as I can."

When he arrived at Lossiemouth the search and rescue hangar was booming and rattling under the hurricane's onslaught.

Curtains of freezing rain, driven horizontally by Force 12 squalls, rattled against its steel doors. Outside on the tarmac, sodden, cursing mechanics struggled to stay on their feet as they prepared a second Sea King—Rescue 38—for take-off.

Lakey, still dressed in his best civilian suit, had with him the man he had promised to collect, winchman Rick Bragg, a 26-year-old sergeant from Yorkshire. Waiting for them was winch operator Campbell, the man who had phoned Lakey, and the co-pilot, Flight Lieutenant Dave Simpson whom Campbell had tracked down in the officers' mess.

Clustered round the radio in the little operations room beside the crewroom they listened to the details of the drama being enacted aboard the burning ship. She was the 15,952-ton Swedish chemical cargo carrier Finneagle.

The four aviators changed into flying kit as they listened to the bald, unemotional transmissions. Rescue 37 was making poor time because of the storm . . . A British Airways S-61 helicopter had joined the rescue attempt . . . an RAF Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft had taken off from Kinloss to provide top cover for the operation.

At 11.10 p.m. came grave news from Finneagle. Another huge explosion had rocked her 590ft length as more volatile chemicals had gone up. It was now even more imperative than before that her crew should be winched to safety.

Half an hour later Lakey made a decision. "I think we'd better pitch in with our ten pennorth," he told his crew.

"Do you want to take a doctor along?" asked Campbell.

"Yes—and get Rick to sign for some morphine. There might be some injured to deal with."

Lakey's decision to fly was made before either of the already-airborne helicopters had reached the burning ship, at a time when there was no reason to suppose that they would not be able to cope. Furthermore it would rob the air base of its stand-by search and rescue crew. So if another emergency arose a *third* crew would have to be scraped together from somewhere.

Yet had the sandy-haired pilot not made that choice, 22 men, women and children would almost certainly have died.

For not long afterwards, when Rescue 37 finally reached Finneagle, things began to go wrong. Badly, hopelessly wrong. . . .

AT 11.55 p.m. Mike Lakey opened his throttles and Rescue 38 lifted from Lossiemouth's wet tarmac.

He was in the right-hand captain's seat with Dave Simpson on his left. Sitting in the rear cabin with Bill Campbell and Rick Bragg was a new arrival—Squadron Leader Hamish Grant, the station medical officer.

As they pitched and heaved through the storm they listened grim-faced to the radio reports being transmitted from the rescue scene. They did not paint a very reassuring picture.

The blazing ship, her crew unable to reach the engine controls, was making eight knots, corkscrewing violently over 70ft waves. The fire had burned through the steering linkage and her captain was having to rely on his emergency steering system to keep her head to the wind.

Time and again Rescue 37 had tried to lower a lifting harness to the ship, only to be beaten back by fresh billows of flames or forced to sheer off as Finneagle's dizzily-waving radio mast threatened to knock her out of the sky.

After several abortive attempts had ended in near-catastrophe, the Sea King stood off to let the civilian volunteers aboard Rescue 17, the British Airways S-61, have a go.

They fared no better. Indeed, with their slower winch motor, shorter lifting cable and less sophisticated flying aids, they were worse placed than the RAF machine, but stubbornly refused to quit.

ORANGE

By now Lakey and his crew were 200 miles away and catching their first awed sight of Finneagle—an unearthly orange glow on the horizon, reflecting sullenly on the heaving seas and lowering storm clouds.

Gradually a choking, pungent odour began to seep into the cockpit, irritating their throats and causing their eyes to water.

Dave Simpson spoke from the co-pilot's seat. "Mike, I don't like the smell of that, whatever it is," he said. "I think it might be a good idea to bugger off out of it as fast as we can."

Lakey didn't argue. A helicopter crewed by men ill and vomiting from chemical poisoning would be of no help to those aboard the ship.

He turned to the left, swinging Rescue 38 out of the gases that were being driven downwind towards them and approached the casualty in a wide, curving sweep from the south west.

At 12.40 a.m. Rescue 37 had to give up the hopeless

struggle. By now she was low on fuel and her crew were exhausted and shaken by their series of near collisions with Finneagle's radio mast. She broke off and headed for Kirkwall Airport, Orkney.

Rescue 17 had better reserves of fuel and so remained, but was still unable to lower a line to the Swedish sailors.

"She was still there when we arrived some time after 1 a.m. — flying round in a fairly excited manner and trying to get a line down," Lakey recalls.

"I've never seen anything quite like it. The ship was well alight and the glow of the flames reflected off the S-61's underside.

"Finneagle hit a trough, burying herself in water. But after the waves had crashed over her, she still came up blazing merrily.

"We were all a bit aghast at the scene. But when you see 22 people huddled on the deck of a burning ship—among them women and children—you can only put your trust in the Almighty and get on with the job."

At a height of 200ft he steered towards Finneagle's port side and hovered for five minutes while the British Airways machine made yet another fruitless attempt at rescue.

From this vantage point he took stock. The Swedish ship was an incongruous-looking craft. Almost all her superstructure was in the bows, giving her a curious nose-heavy appearance. Midships was the blazing centre deck section. Aft was a low superstructure topped by a funnel, behind which was a huge stern ramp.

On the bridge was a small sea of upturned, hopeful faces glowing ruddily in the light of the dancing flames.

Only one face was missing —that of Captain Bertil Waenerlund, wrestling with the emergency steering in the wheelhouse. His was a difficult task, for if he allowed the ship to turn from the oncoming mountainous seas, she would surely broach and founder.

As he hovered Lakey glanced at his airspeed indicator. It showed 70 knots, though the helicopter was not moving — an ominous reminder of the brute force of the storm into which it was flying.

The S-61 called it a day at this time, wheeling away from the ship to give Rescue 38 a clear field.

In the rear cabin Sergeant Bragg clambered into his harness, bravely volunteering to go down to try to lift the survivors. He took a deep breath and went over the side. Almost immediately the shrieking wind flung him back towards the tail.

"Sod this for a lark!" he yelled. "Winch me back in!"

His words, of course, could not be heard, but Bill Campbell, seeing the sergeant trailing almost horizontally on the end of the wire, got the message and hit the winch control.

"Rick managed a fairly close and detailed inspection of the tail rotor," says Lakey dryly. "So we got him in fast and tried to think of something else."

The "something else" they decided on was a piece of equipment called a hi-line, a 150ft nylon extension rope attached to the end of the winch wire.

If they could somehow get this line to the people below, the Swedish seamen could use it to haul in the rescue harness as Campbell paid out the wire.

As the line was lashed in place, Lakey and Simpson made rapid calculations from their instrument readings, measuring the ship's speed, then using the radio altimeter to calculate how high she was rising when she hit a big wave.

It was all rule-of-thumb stuff, but it gave the pilots some idea of the safety margins to which they would be working.

One worry, at least, had been removed. Finneagle's chief engineer had managed to scramble to the top of the bridge and hack down the radio mast which had been such a threat to the helicopters. Unable to reach his tools in the engine room, he had improvised with a meat cleaver from the galley.

Lakey nosed forward until Rescue 38 was flying ahead of the bows, keeping station with the runaway ship at a steady eight knots, as Campbell began to pay out the winch wire and the whipping hi-line.

SNAKING

His was a delicate, frustrating job. The line, despite steadying lead weights on the end, was snaking wildly in the wind. He winched out slowly and a forest of arms reached out for the dancing line.

A capricious blast of wind flicked it out of reach. Campbell groaned and tried again. Once more the outstretched hands missed by a few tantalising inches.

He steadied himself in the doorway of the pitching, swaying cabin and let out a few more feet of cable, watching the white nylon line writhe towards the figures silhouetted by the flames.

"They've got it!" he shouted exultantly, feeding out more cable as willing hands pulled at the hi-line to drag the rescue harness towards the bridge. At the same time Lakey gingerly changed course, moving from his position ahead of the bows to a new station off the ship's port side, in line with the bridge.

He was only too aware that any sudden movement could snatch the slender line from the clutching hands. Cautiously he crabbed sideways, constantly working the controls to try to iron out the battering body blows of the storm.

A hundred years later he was in position.

"Two people in the strops," Campbell reported. "Come right slowly."

This was the tricky part. If they winched at this angle the two people in the harness would swing straight into the bridge rails. The wire would have to be vertical—and that meant hovering above the bridge.

Carefully he inched the six-ton machine to the right, eyes darting to the radio altimeter to keep above the safe height he had set himself.

Now he was flying blind, for most of the ship's length was hidden from his view by the cabin floor. He was relying totally on Bill Campbell, peering down from the rear door, giving him a running commentary on the relative positions of ship and aircraft until, at last, the winch cable was plumb.

At that moment a huge wave engulfed Finneagle. She staggered and rolled, dipping

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'My God—they have a kid each,' gasped Campbell and he slowed the human cargo

her port scuppers beneath the water. Her mainmast arced sideways towards Rescue 38 like a toppling tree.

"Up! Up! Up!" Campbell roared into the intercom. The spar was only feet away from the rotor and still coming. One touch against the blades and the Sea King would tear herself apart, killing her crew and the Swedes waiting below her belly.

The two Gnome engines howled and the machine bucked upwards as Lakey and Simpson hauled back on the controls. The slack, curving cable sprang bowstring taut and the two people in the harness were yanked off the bridge into the air.

So abrupt was their ascent that they danced on the end of the cable barefoot, leaving two pairs of clogs standing on deck!

Campbell winched in fast. As the survivors were reeled in towards him he saw they were women, spinning face to face in the twin harness.

He was astonished to see that each woman had a young boy clasped in her arms, small, frightened faces upturned to the deafening roar of the helicopter, blond fringes plastered flat by the rotor's fierce downdraught.

"My God—they've got a kid each!" he gasped into the microphone and immediately slowed the winch to its slowest speed. It would be all too easy for a sudden coarse movement of the aircraft to dislodge one or both youngsters from the women's precarious grasp. There would be no second chance. A small child would die instantly in those raging seas.

Campbell seemed to hold his breath for a long time until the human cargo rose level with the door. He and Bragg pulled them aboard.

Once aboard, the boys' fear evaporated. Aged six and three, they looked around them with bright-eyed excitement. First a shipwreck and now a ride in a helicopter—what an adventure to recount to their friends back home in Gothenburg.

Four saved on the first lift! It was an achievement that augured well, though the spectacular method of their leaving the ship had caused a problem.

When Campbell had managed to trail the hi-line on to Finneagle's bridge one of the sailors had hitched it to a stanchion. The sudden jerk which had lifted the women and children had snapped it like a piece of cotton, breaking it at a weak point specifically designed as a fail-safe to prevent rescue helicopters being tethered and dragged out of the sky.

Now they had only two hi-lines left. While Bragg and Campbell attached one of them, Lakey jockeyed back to his original position in front of the ship's bows.

This time the Swedes caught the hi-line on the first attempt and began to haul in the strop.

"Someone's using his loaf down there," Campbell said approvingly. "They've put the next two blokes outside the bridge rails so we can pull them straight off without dragging them into the rails."

For the pilots it was good news. It meant they could lift from the port flank without having to jockey inboard and risk another collision with the mainmast.

Of course, the two men would have a bit of a wild ride for they would swing outboard the moment they broke contact with the ship. But if their mates did the right thing and paid out the hi-line until the wire was hanging vertical, it wouldn't be too uncomfortable.

In the eery glow of the flames the two Swedes let go their grip on the bridge rails. Instantly they swung outwards across the confusion of torn water and driving spray.

Sergeant Bragg swore to himself. Once more the hi-line had been lashed to a stanchion and, as the men swung out, it tautened suddenly—and broke.

Campbell winched in at top speed—200 feet per minute—to lift the men before the pendulum effect swung them back into the side of the bridge. They were dragged aboard and another hi-line was attached to the winch cable.

This was the last one. If it, too, snapped there wouldn't be much hope of rescue for the 16 remaining seamen.

And that, only moments later, is almost what happened.

As the seamen of Finneagle's bridge seized the hi-line their ship turned without warning, sheering violently to starboard and staggering under thousands of tons of water as her port side was presented to the oncoming sea.

DRIFTED

Desperately trying to keep the hi-line slack, Lakey turned with the ship, reeling the Sea King hard over to the right. But now the ship's captain was correcting his rudder and Finneagle drifted out of the pilot's sight beneath his aircraft's belly.

"Hey, boss, it's a bit bloody warm back here!" Bragg's voice sounded in his headphones.

They were right over the fire.

Quickly, but not as quickly as he would have liked, for he was still conscious that they were down to their last hi-line, Lakey ruddered back to his original position by the port wing of the bridge.

Even there the inferno was uncomfortably close. Fresh detonations sent flames, debris and oily black smoke whoofing upwards, far higher than the helicopter. One explosion seemed to gather itself in the ship's bowels before erupting like a bursting blast furnace. The Sea King rolled wildly in the shock waves.

"Are you OK, Rescue 38" came an anxious radio mes-

sage from the Nimrod that was circling overhead.

"Yes, thanks, we're fine."

"Thank Christ for that. We thought you'd blown up."

At last the Swedish sailors had realised that it was not a good idea to lash the hi-line to the ship. Now they were using it properly, paying it out or even letting go altogether if they thought too much strain was about to be placed upon it.

Two by two they came up, crowding into the overladen cabin.

It took an hour; sixty interminable, fearful and exhausting minutes, but at last the tolling airmen had 20 souls aboard. Only two remained on the ship—Captain Waenerlund and his chief engineer.

The former could not be seen; he was still at his post in the wheelhouse. The latter was on the wing of the bridge, catching the hi-line as it was lowered for the last time.

He shrugged his way into the harness and then, using the meat cleaver with which he had felled the radio mast, banged loudly on the wheelhouse roof.

Says Lakey: "The skipper came dashing out like a rat up a drainpipe and got into the other harness. Bill hit the switch and he and the engineer swung outwards . . . without anyone on the hi-line it was a bit of a hairy ride, I'm afraid."

The two officers catapulted from the bridge, cartwheeling through the screaming wind.

It was a spectacular end to a spectacular rescue.

There was a clamour of excited approval from Finneagle's crew as their last two shipmates swung in through the door.

Rick Bragg sniffed. "That's *another* bloody hi-line gone for a ball of chalk," he muttered. . . .

THE following July, Flight Lieutenant Lakey travelled to Buckingham Palace to receive the George Medal from the Queen for what his commanding officer had described as "probably the most remarkable rescue in the history of the helicopter service anywhere in the world."

Flight Lieutenant Campbell was decorated with the Air Force Cross. Sergeant Bragg received the Air Force Medal. Flight Lieutenant Simpson was presented with the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air and a Queen's Commendation for Brave Conduct went to Squadron Leader Hamish Grant, the medical officer.

Other honours followed. Lakey received the Order of the Golden Lion of Stockholm and went to Los Angeles to be presented with the International Helicopter Heroism Award. He was elected "Scot of the Year."

The crew became recipients of a new air-sea rescue award from the Fishermen and Mariners' Protection Society. Finneagle's owners sent them a cheque for £1,000 which they promptly donated to the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund.

In Sweden Lakey was feted as a national hero. He flew there to be presented with the silver medal of the Swedish Lifesaving Association and to be reunited with Finneagle's crew, including three-year-old Jonas Gustavson and his six-year-old brother Johan. For four days he was an honoured guest at official functions.

He was even able to board Finneagle, salvaged when the fire had been put out ten days after the rescue, and then being rebuilt in dry dock in Gothenburg.

The owners presented him with a replica of her ship's bell, which now hangs in the officers' mess at R.A.F. Lossiemouth.

Engraved on it are these words:

The crew members, their families and the owners of Finneagle express their gratitude for the most courageous rescue of all on board the vessel when she was burning and in a gale and had to be abandoned at 3.10 on October 2, 1980.

The bravery and endurance of the crew are beyond all praise.

NEXT WEEK: A fishing trip ends in disaster

HELICOPTER HEROES

As he struck the water he gave a gasp ...it was freezing!

by JOHN BEATTIE

LIKE some ungainly yellow bird the big Sea King helicopter wheeled in the grey and troubled sky, shuddering uneasily as keen gusts of wind smacked against its flanks.

Instinctively the pilot's limbs reacted to the movements, countering them with minute adjustments to the controls. The five-bladed rotor, spun by twin Gnome jets, flexed and bit into the turbulent air to hold the six-ton aircraft steady.

In the isolated Northumberland farmhouses below, ovens were warming for the Sunday roast. Distant church bells tolled their invitation to morning service across the snow-blanketed landscape.

It was a filthy day, that morning of February 22, 1981. Up to eight inches of snow covered most of Britain and more was falling, driven by a 25 knot southerly wind. Squalls of blizzard intensity obsured the ground as Flight Lieutenant John Streeter and his crew of three flew their routine training mission.

In an hour or so they would turn for base at RAF Boulmer on the wild Northumberland coast for their own Sunday lunch in the crewroom of their unit, "A" Flight, 202 Squadron—a welcome social break in the often-tedious 24-hour spell on search and rescue standby.

But a few miles away a drama was brewing that was to ensure that none of the helicopter crew would suffer from boredom *that* day. And the hectic adventure that lay ahead would not end until long after their lunches had congealed on the plates.

Cullercoats Bay, a rocky indentation in the bleak coast north of Tyemouth, is a picturesque place that lies only eight miles from the centre of Newcastle. Cullercoats village has, for centuries, been a fishing community whose menfolk have wrested a living from the treacherous North Sea.

It is also the haunt of weekend fishermen, Geordies and other "townies" who go there and hire a coble to be loaded with rods, bait, sandwiches and beer before putting to sea for a day's sport.

That Sunday morning was decidely not fishing weather. The stiff southerly wind rated Force Six on the Beaufort Scale and came armed with teeth that cut a chill through the thickest garments. Heavily laced with snowflakes, it had sufficient power to slice off the white crests of the 12-foot waves that milled within the bay.

Into these menacing conditions a party of amateur fishermen from North Shields launched a 14ft coble. They were James Brown, aged 45, his 18-year-old son, John, and two friends, Jim Dorman and Ron Errington. None wore lifejackets, and the seas were cold enough to kill a man within half an hour.

Yet Mr Brown and his party launched their boat, unwilling to call off the morning's fishing to which they had been looking forward.

Theirs was a fatal determination. Within minutes of battling through the rolling breakers into the open waters of the bay disaster struck.. A racing wave caught them, shouldering the cockleshell craft on to its side and pitching the four men over the gunwhales into the incoming tide.

Hoarse and panic-striken cries for help shredded by the moaning wind, somehow reached ears on shore. Someone began running towards a telephone kiosk. . . .

IT WAS 10.5 a.m. The Sea King hung in a noisy hover over a disused airfield at Brunton, five miles north of Boulmer, as her crew practised winching techniques. Flight Sergeant Peter "Jock" Menmuir, the winchman, stood in the open door on the starboard side of the main cabin, his face blotchy red from the icy blast, and contemplated without enthusiasm another trip on the wire down to the wintry landscape 10ft below.

It was at that moment that the VHF radio, tuned to the emergency frequency, crackled into life. *Tynemouth Coastguards report a small fishing coble has overturned off Cullercoats. Four men are in the water nearby. Can you give assistance?*

Almost before Squadron Leader John Corby, the winch operator, had radioed confirmation of the signal, the Sea King, nose down, was clopping southwards at 120 miles an hour through the driving flakes of snow.

Suddenly routine training was forgotten as the crew mentally adjusted themselves to handling a "for real" situation. None did so more assiduously than Jock Menmuir. For he knew that

'You're OK! Do you hear? Hang on!' Menmuir yelled ...

within minutes he would be splashing into the chilling clutches of the sea . . . that whether men lived or died would depend on his abilities.

An experienced winchman, the 29-year-old Arbroath man had been dunked in the sea more times than he could remember, and knew that his training was the best, designed to enable him to cope with whatever demands might be placed upon him.

But looking down at the angry, seething waves below the speeding helicopter he couldn't avoid a twinge of apprehension as he double-checked the equipment on which his life would soon, quite literally, hang. . . .

GASPING with cold, the four men coughed, cursed and prayed as they fought to stay afloat in the tossing seas. Though the tide was coming in it was no match for the strong and turbulent currents that slowly but inevitably pushed them away from the tantalisingly close shoreline.

The waves were giving them a dreadful pounding, bursting over their heads to engulf them with an icy, suffocating force. The youngest, 18-year-old John Brown, was fit and, of all of them, faring the best. Somehow he managed to claw his way towards one of the finger-like rock causeways that point out into the bay.

If he reached it, it would be a precarious-enough haven. For breakers were bursting over it constantly. But a haven of sorts it would be. Sobbing with exertion, crippled by the cold and retching from the salt water he had swallowed, the youngster flailed his arms desperately . . and felt a shock of relief as one numb hand slapped against a rock. His other hand found some sort of grip and he hung there, flinching as another wave thundered over him.

Beneath him a rising swell bunched its muscles. Floating in its embrace, blinded and winded, he felt himself ascend. His hands scrabbled for fresh holds on the rocks, tearing his fingernails. Like a stranded crab he was pitched on to the streaming causeway, lying face down, totally spent as the wave that had saved his life retreated. Helping hands seized him and half-carried him to safety.

In the boiling waters of the bay his father and the other two men were in grave difficulties as the appalling cold sapped them of energy and forced their limbs into cramp.

James Brown, enmeshed in a rope from the boat and hampered by heavy oilskins, was unable to fight the sea any longer. He gagged weakly as seawater filled his lungs and stomach.

It is doubtful whether he even heard the clamour of the Sea King as it hurdled the cliffs and arrowed down towards the upturned coble.

"THERE they are!" The voice of the co-pilot Flight Lieutenant Bob Neville rang out over the intercom as the helicopter swept above the fingers of rock. On one stood a uniformed policeman and a gaggle of fishermen with their arms outstretched, pointing towards the whaleback hump of the coble's keel which by now, was barely breaking the surface of the water.

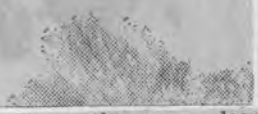
In the open cabin door of the Sea King, Jock Menmuir, buffeted by the fierce downdraught from the 62ft rotor, felt the reassuring slap of Squadron Leader Corby's gloved hand on the top of his white bone-dome . . . then he was pirouetting on the end of the wire as the 600lb capacity winch began to unwind him towards a barely moving figure 40ft below.

As he hit the water he gave an involuntary gasp. *God, it was bloody freezing.* A rising wave hit him and he windmilled furiously with his arms and legs to prevent himself from spinning. Despite his "bunny suit," a woolly combination garment beneath his tight-fitting rubber immersion suit, the cold gnawed at him like a hungry animal.

He went under, then surfaced, shaking his head to clear the stinging seawater from his eyes. He caught a blurred glimpse of an arm a few feet away and lunged towards it.

His fingers fastened on the arm and he yanked it towards him to narrow the gap between him and the drowning man. A white vacant face

Robbed of its three victims the sea set out to level the score



lolled towards him. There was no movement in the body other than the involuntary responses caused by the swirl of the sea. *Christ, the bastard's dead already,* he thought.

He stared grimly into the upturned, unseeing eyes as he twisted the man's right arm anti-clockwise to lock the elbow. That way he could use its rigidity as a lever to shove him upwards and outwards while he looped the canvas rescue strop over his shoulders.

As the strop nestled beneath the man's armpits. Menmuir signalled with one hand and felt the comforting jerk of the winch tightening his harness. As they came clear of the water, he crooked his finger into the other's mouth to clear it of vomit or other obstructions before giving him the kiss of life.

To his astonishment — for he had been convinced the man was dead—the eyelids flickered open as they ascended towards the Sea King. Bawling at the top of his voice to make himself heard over the thunder of the rotor, the flight sergeant yelled: "You're OK! Do you hear? You're OK! For Christ's sake hang on." He shook him vigorously.

It was vital to keep him conscious so he could fight for his life against the effects of cold, shock and near-drowning. Menmuir shouted and shook him all the way up until John Corby swung them inboard to sprawl on the cabin floor.

There, officer and NCO went to work on the casualty, 25-year-old Ron Errington, forcing him to vomit to clear the seawater from his system, then continuing the shouting match to try to stop him from slipping into unconsciousness as they packed him with blankets to provide him with life-giving warmth.

The first faint flush of colour was returning to the pallid cheeks when John Corby tapped Menmuir on the shoulder and pointed out of the door. "Look," he said. "There's another one!" Menmuir peered over the sill and spotted a dark blob in the white waters. Ten seconds later he was on his way down once more, his chest still heaving from his earlier exertions.

The man, James Dorman, aged 31, was only an ace away from death. Even as the flight sergeant bobbed towards him he slipped beneath the water until only the top of his head was showing.

The winchman plopped into the water right beside him and looped his arms round his chest to lift his head out of the choking waves. With the skill of long practice, he slid the strop around Dorman's shoulders and waved violently to the watching Corby.

AN age later he breasted the door sill and crawled into the cabin as the squadron leader eased the second rescued man to the floor. He was relieved to see that the first man he had lifted, Errington, was still alive.

But his new "client" was clearly on the brink of death, lying unmoving with no discernible pulse or breathing. The two airmen flung themselves at him, clamping an oxygen mask over his face and pummelling his chest to keep the heart beating.

"He looked like a goner," Menmuir recalls. "We knew that without hospital treatment he wouldn't last more than a few minutes. But we also knew there was another man in the water somewhere, though we couldn't see him. It was also a certainty that he was dead already. So we had to make the choice of trying to save the two who were still alive before coming back for the other man."

Three or four minutes later the Sea King put down in Castle Leazes Park, close by Newcastle Royal Infirmary, where waiting ambulance men unloaded the two fishermen.

All that now remained was the heartbreaking, but non-urgent, task of returning to Cullercoats to search for the body of James Brown.

That, at any rate, was how the RAF men saw the situation. But at that very moment a fresh drama was unfolding in Cullercoats Bay . . . almost as if the sea, having been robbed of three victims, was determined to extract reparation.

For as Menmuir had been fighting his battle with the waves, the men of Cullercoats lifeboat station had gallantly launched their rubber inshore rescue boat into the heavy, confused seas to give what assistance they could.

It had been a rough and hair-raising ride for the three crewmen, Stuart Brown, Jim Griffith and Graham Boyd. For their small open boat, though fast, was designed for operations in more tranquil weather.

Grimly they hung on to the bucking, flexing craft as its twin outboards sent it leap-frogging the wave tops and through the driving snow. All three men were drenched by driving spray and the awful cold was gnawing at their bodies.

Suddenly a freak wave, a huge hill of boiling water, reared up ahead of them, impossibly steep. The rubber boat clawed its way to the summit, hung there for a long moment with its engines howling, then cartwheeled in an avalanche of foam, flinging her crew of three into the bay.

Watchers on shore could only curse helplessly as they watched the boat flop on to its back—right on top of one of her struggling crew.

The second "Mayday" came as the Sea King, in a blinding white-out, climbed out of Castle Leazes Park. *Inshore Rescue Boat overturned in Cullercoats Bay. Can you search for survivors?*

"GOD, here we go again," Menmuir muttered, already exhausted and badly dehydrated by the sweat of his earlier exertions, as the pilot shoved open the throttles and charged back towards the coast.

There the man beneath the boat, 33-year-old Graham Boyd, was engaged in a bitter fight for his life as his two mates floundered in open water, calling his name. In claustrophobic darkness, gasping for air, he struggled to fight his way out from what would shortly become a rubber funeral shroud.

His cries for help were heard by Jim Griffith who, despite his own fast-failing physical resources, managed to raise one side of the boat and drag the terrified Boyd out. Then he somehow kicked and fought his way on to the upturned keel.

But when he tried to pull Boyd up beside him his muscles failed; all he could do was to yell encouragement to his two friends as they bobbed at the whim of the sea in their life-vests.

The Mae Wests, of course, would keep them afloat—but were no protection against the exploding waves that constantly smothered them, nor against the crippling cold, nor against the injuries they would sustain were they to be flung violently against the rocks. Unless they were rescued within minutes they would find themselves in the same physical state as the men they had turned out to save.

Clinging to the tossing rubber boat, Griffith cocked his head round as he heard the rhythmic drumming of an aircraft and managed a quick wave as the Sea King shot into sight above the cliffs.

From the open doorway, Jock Menmuir, already clipped to the winch cable, swung out. Behind him, buckled to a safety strap, Squadron Leader Corby leaned out, watching the flight sergeant's progress downwards. Through his throat mike he gave a constant barrage of minute course alterations, acting as the "eyes" of the pilots who could not, of course, see what was happening behind and below them.

From the comparative safety of the upturned boat, Griffith kept his arm outstretched, pointing towards Graham Boyd. To Menmuir and Corby the message was clear—that was the man they had to lift first.

The winch operator gave a small grunt of satisfaction when he saw that he had landed the winchman right on target. All Menmuir had to do was reach out and grab his man.

When he did the lifeboatman was struggling and panicky—small wonder after his terrible ordeal beneath the RNLI boat.

"Just relax, mate," Menmuir gasped, spitting out sea water. "Take it easy. Calm down. We'll have you out in a jiffy. Just leave it to me."

The soothing patter broke through the man's fears and Menmuir was able to guide him into the strop. Corby winched them free of the water. Dangling a few feet above the waves, they swung through the air as the Sea King clattered forward to the rock causeway where the policeman and fishermen were waiting.

There Menmuir handed his charge over before being whisked off to be dunked in the sea beside Stuart Brown, who was floating only a few yards from the rocks. He grabbed the lifeboatman and wrapped his arms round him to stop him from floating away.

FROM the doorway of the aircraft John Corby watched until he was sure Menmuir had a firm grip on the man, then spoke into his throat-mike to the pilot. "Go forward slowly," he said. "We'll try to tow them to the rocks."

Like an angler playing a fish, Corby constantly flicked the winch switch up and down, giving them slack when they needed it, tautening the cable when necessary, as the machine crabbed slowly towards the rocks.

A breaking wave tumbled down the length of rock. Menmuir said rude words as it flung them against the unyielding causeway, rolling them in a crazy, painful waltz.

What followed was a flurried, knee-banging, elbow-bruising scramble. As the next wave gathered itself, Menmuir snapped an order: "Now — grab that rock, quick!"

Obediently the dazed lifeboatman reached for the limpet-covered boulder. Menmuir, like a bouncer chucking a rioter out of a night club, seized his clothing and propelled him forwards and upwards.

He staggered to his feet on the rocks and waved a feeble acknowledgement, but Menmuir did not see it. He had already turned and was swimming with leaden limbs to go to the aid of Jim Griffith.

It was a tremendous relief when he saw that the third lifeboatman did not need his help. Wind or tide had driven the RNLI boat on to the rocks and Griffith was able to step to safety.

Unutterably weary, the flight sergeant was content to hang in his harness as Corby winched him back into the warmth of the cabin.

"I was damned glad that Jim had made it on his own, because the job had been the most exhausting I had ever known," says Menmuir. "Despite the cold I was absolutely drenched with sweat . . . all I wanted to do was to sit down and have a breather."

He sat, aching and breathing hard, with his head bowed over his knees. But even that respite was short-lived. By now ambulances had arrived to take the shocked and freezing lifeboatmen to hospital.

Four times more Menmuir was winched down—three times to lift the rescued men from their rocky perch to the waiting ambulances; the fourth time to drag their boat to the beach.

Squadron Leader Corby recalls: "Jock was bushed—just about all-in. He'd done a wonderful job, working like a one-armed paperhanger.

"But none of us wanted to quit without finding the body of the dead man. Even though we knew there was no hope for him, we had to think of the family. He was a father and a husband — his family had a right to give him the dignity of a funeral.

"So Jock went down again." The simple statement speaks volumes about the dedication and sense of duty that motivates men like Jock Menmuir. He could easily — and justifiably — have claimed to have done as much as could be expected of him, called it a day and flown home for a well-earned rest.

But he didn't, and a couple of minutes later was gasping in the freezing water beside the upturned coble. Clinging to its planks he went right round it, hand over hand.

Nothing.

Then he jammed the heels of his hands beneath the gunwales, took a deep breath and lifted with all his might. He raised the starboard side a few inches out of the water and peered through the gap.

Nothing.

He was lifted back to the helicopter and lent his eyes to yet another search of the bay.

The rubber boat cartwheeled in an avalanche of foam

THE grey of the sea. the black rocks, the drifting skeins of snow — everything was a blurred monochrome.

Then there was a patch of yellow.

That's him!

Corby skilfully steered the winchman into the water, only feet from where the yellow-oilskinned figure was floating, face down, three feet below the surface.

But once he was in the water Menmuir could see nothing. The swirling waters were opaque, rendered more so by the fierce downdraught from the Sea King's rotor.

"From 40ft up, I could see the body, but Jock was completely blind, working only by touch," says John Corby. "It was very frustrating watching him so close to the body, yet unable to know which way to turn.

"So what I did was winch him about 10 feet out of the water then, lowering winch at full speed, lite— lob him at the body as son one might cast a fly towards a trout."

Menmuir was puzzled, wondering why Corby was lifting him, when the sudden heart-stopping fall plunged him back into the ocean. He had time only for a quick gulp of air before the waters closed over his head.

Realisation dawned. Corby had worked out that he couldn't see and that he wasn't able to submerge of his own volition because of his life jacket. So the winch operator was using the force of gravity to get him under.

Then his Mae West popped him back to the surface. He filled his lungs with air. This time he would be ready.

Corby raised him [illegible] more—and dropped him. As he sank he opened his eyes and, through the murky waters, caught a glimpse of an indistinct yellow shape. He grabbed it as his life-jacket buoyed him back to the surface.

Between his fingers he felt the coarse fibres of a rope, twined round the dead man's waist. He clung to this as he felt the helicopter begin to tow them carefully towards the rocks.

But it slipped from his numbed hands and the body sank slowly out of sight.

Again he was lifted from the water; again John Corby was right on target; again Menmuir grabbed the rope. He began hauling the corpse towards him, but with a perversity that brought a groan of frustration to his lips the coils chose that moment to unwind.

Once more the body began to sink. Menmuir flung himself forward and felt his fingers fasten on the bulky oilskin coat. He clung on tenaciously and was glad to feel the heavy body moving with him as the Sea King towed them to the rocks.

A wave flung him against the reef, but still he held on to his pathetic bundle. Another wave, then another —battering and bruising him on the unyielding rock.

Then the weight of the man was gone as a forest of hands reached down and dragged the body out of his arms, up on to the reef. A sharp tug on his harness told him that Corby was winching him in.

When he reached the door, he stumbled in and dropped to the floor, fighting for breath like a beached fish, more weary than he had ever been in his life.

BACK at Boulmer, he showered and changed before driving with the rest of the crew to the Fishing Boat Inn for a few pints. The first one slid down without touching the sides. . . .

During the brief course of one hectic Sunday morning he had saved four men from drowning though, tragically, Jim Dorman was to die later in hospital, never having woken from the coma brought about by his ordeal.

When the pub closed, someone gave Jock Menmuir a lift home. His wife Sheila smiled as he let himself in through the kitchen door.

"Hello," she said. "Have you had a good day?"

"*Busy, love. Busy.*" he replied.

THE END

Bravery of a winchman . . .

By ALASTAIR BISSET

THE RAF Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter crew involved in yesterday's rescue took less than 30 minutes to pluck the 17 men to safety.

And for winchman Steve Oliver it was a personal feat of bravery in tricky conditions.

He plunged into a 10ft. swell and swam with a lifeline to save five of the survivors still on board the stricken helicopter.

The first 12 survivors had already been winched to safety as the Lossiemouth helicopter hovered 50ft. overhead.

Steve said "It was the only way I cold get round the helicopter to them. It was only a distance of 30 or 40 feet, and the sea was not too choppy.

"There was a six to 10-foot, swell but I knew that I could make it."

The Lossiemouth helicopter captain, Flt. Lt. Ian Macfarlane, said: "The two dinghies put out by the ditched helicopter had got caught up and fouled and we put out one at a height of 20 feet. We got 12 of the survivors on to it and managed to winch them on board in twos.

"Then Steve, dragging a line with another of our dinghies, had to do his swimming act to get to the others.

"Fortunately, the weather conditions were not too bad and it turned out to be an easier task than might have been expected."

By LINDSEY BARRIE

THE helicopter rescue went smoothly and according to plan, with no immediate danger to anyone said a spokesman for HM Coastguard, Aberdeen where the whole operation was monitored.

The coastguards at Aberdeen received word of the emergency just before 3 p.m. They alerted shipping in the area

The Sea King from RAF Lossiemouth and a British Airways helicopter from Dyce also set off for the scene.

The coastguard HQ kept in constant touch with the progress of the rescue aircraft and by about 4.20 p.m. it was reported that they had arrived.

At 4.40 p.m. word came through that the Sea King and the BAH aircraft were circling over the ditched helicopter. A dinghy was sitting beside it with some men on board and the men were being winched aboard the Sea King.

By 4.50 p.m. all the men had been reported safely winched aboard the Sea King which had begun to head for Dyce. It arrived there about 5.40 p.m.

But there was no panic, says N.E. man

By BERT OVENSTONE

AN EXPLOSION shook the British Airways helicopter minutes before it was forced to ditch, it was stated last night.

The Sikorsky aircraft — with one engine out of action — had to put down in the sea after a fault appeared with the lubrication system.

Survivor Mr Alan Williamson spoke of seeing hydraulic oil pouring down a window of the helicopter.

A wireline operator, Mr Williamson (26), was last night recovering at his home, 17 Kinmundy Gardens, Westhill, near Aberdeen.

He said: "The first we heard was when one of the engines gave out. There was a loud explosion which shook the helicopter.

"We thought that with one engine out that we could make a landing on a rig, but things went bad pretty quickly.

"There was no panic on board — everyone was very good. The landing was very, very good."

No one on board received any injury, but several were seasick during the 45-minute wait before they were rescued.

The passengers and crew were examined by three doctors on their arrival at Aberdeen Airport.

Mr Williamson and two others on the helicopter, Mr Hector Sutherland, Foveran, and Mr Andres Bartrina, Balmedie, both Aberdeenshire, are employees of Schlumberger Inland Services, who have offices in Dee Street, Aberdeen.

Mr Williamson said most of the other passengers on board worked for either catering or construction companies.

The BA helicopter had been on charter to Occidental Petroleum.

A London spokesman for the oil company said last night they would not be issuing a passenger list.

"We only do that if there are any casualties."

He said that only one survivor was an Occidental employee. The others were employees of companies on contract to Occidental.

RELAXING over a coffee are the RAF Lossiemouth Sea King rescue helicopter crew (left to right) winchman Steve Oliver, co-pilot Flt. Lt Neil Livermore, winch operator Roger Whitehead and helicopter captain Flt. Lt. Ian Macfarlane.

The Daily Telegraph, Saturday, March 12, 1983

17 SURVIVE HELICOPTER DITCHING

Daily Telegraph Reporter

FIFTEEN oilmen and two crew members of a ditched helicopter were plucked from the North Sea in a "copybook" rescue operation 70 miles off Aberdeen yesterday.

The 17 men were winched to safety by an RAF Sea King helicopter and taken to Aberdeen Airport. No one was injured.

The British Airways S61 helicopter was returned to Aberdeen from the Piper oilfield when engine trouble developed 90 miles offshore.

The pilot, Capt Ian Recton, put out a Mayday call before ditching the aircraft in calm seas. The helicopter stayed afloat with the help of inflated bags, and the men stayed on board until rescue services arrived.

'Very lucky'

Mr Bill Harrold, an RAF spokesman, said the 45-minute rescue operation went perfectly. 'It was a copybook rescue by veterans of this kind of operation, but, if it had not been so calm, it might have been a different story. The men should consider themselves very lucky that they went down in such good weather."

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL SATURDAY MARCH 12 1983

Copters: List of incidents growing

YESTERDAY'S helicopter ditching in the North Sea is the latest in a rapidly-growing list of incidents involving offshore support helicopters.

After 15 years of helicopter flying to and from oil and gas installations with only one fatality, there have been five fatal helicopter accidents both on and offshore within the past two years, in addition to a number of non-fatal but worrying incidents.

The Department of Trade, whose Accident Investigation Branch are sending two senior inspectors to Aberdeen today to begin inquiries into yesterday's ditching, confirmed last night they have five helicopter investigations under way.

Depending on how seriously inspectors Mr Bill Topping and Mr Charles Prothero regard the ditching, yesterday's incident could become the sixth full inspectors' inquiry outstanding, although it could also be classified as a less detailed field inspection.

The North Sea helicopter record, while regarded as outstandingly good in terms of the huge number of helicopter flights carried out, has been deteriorating sharply.

- In March, 1981, a Bristow Helicopters Sikorsky S76 crashed in a field near Longside while on a training flight, killing four people on board.
- In August, 1981, one man died following the ditching of a Bristow's Bell 212 helicopter about 100 miles north-east of Shetland.
- In August, 1981, 13 were killed when a Bristow Wessex crashed just seven miles off Norfolk on a flight to shore from the Leman gas field.
- In September, 1982, a Bristow's Bell 212 crashed, killing all six on board, while on a mercy mission to airlift an injured crewman from an oil-support vessel on the Murchison Field.
- In October, 1982, a Bristow Puma crashed at Aberdeen Airport while on a training flight, killing both pilot and co-pilot.
- In February, 1983, a non-fatal incident but one which is being treated seriously by the DoT's Accident Investigation Branch occurred when a British Airways Chinook with 35 on board made an emergency landing at Longside following either a fire or overheating in a gearbox and shearing of a driveshaft.

Final reports on the circumstances and causes of the last five of these accidents are still awaited. AIB reports under the full inspectors' inquiry procedure can take 18 months or more before being published.

Circumstances in each of these cases have been substantially different and few common factors have emerged.

But yesterday's — happily with no resulting inquiries or loss of life — may well lead to renewed calls for a fresh look at helicopter safety over the North Sea, as well as to praise for a swiftly-mounted and efficient rescue operation.

Calls for public inquiries by Norwich M.P. Mr David Ennals in 1981 and last year from West Aberdeenshire M.P. Sir Russell Fairgrieve and Grampian Region's Councillor Bob Middleton were turned down by the DoT on the grounds that the accident investigation process was already extremely detailed and extensive, and incorporates means to make and enforce recommendations on new air-safety measures where appropriate.

A DoT spokesman said it was too early to judge what might stem from yesterday's ditching, but it should be viewed against the background of many thousands of North Sea oil support flights each year — and a rapid increase in these flights in recent years.

For the 12 months to the end of January, for example, Aberdeen Airport alone handled 39,200 helicopters flights — more than 17% up on the previous 12 months.

The AIB inspectors who will be investigating yesterday's S61 ditching are engineering and operations specialists. One will want to inspect the aircraft for evidence on the causes of the malfunction which forced the pilot to ditch while the other will gather evidence from the crew, passengers and other witnesses with information.

If the incident is thought serious enough to warrant a full inquiry, however, it could be 18 months before a final report by the AIB is published.

British Airways Helicopters were last involved in a ditching in July, 1980,when one of their S61s was forced to come down in the sea about 20 miles off Aberdeen. There were no injuries among the 15 on board,who were flying from the Clyde Field.

BAH said at that time that over the years more than 6,000,000 passengers had boarded their aircraft and all had got off safely. Yesterday's ditching remains only the third such incident in their history and they have maintained their casualty-free record.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL FRIDAY MARCH 25 1983

Crash landing near Aviemore

ISLANDER DOWN SAFE

Pilot, RAF Lossie response praised

By DUNCAN ROSS

THE PILOT of a twin-engined Islander had an amazing escape when his aircraft developed engine trouble and made a crash landing on a mountainside in the Aviemore area last night.

The aircraft was being flown from Perth to Inverness Airport, Dalcross, when the pilot, Capt. Milos Safranek, realised he would have to make a forced landing.

But he kept in continuous radio contact with RAF Lossiemouth and was able to guide their Sea King rescue helicopter straight to his landing spot in the snow-covered hills between Aviemore and Carrbridge.

The helicopter was able to set off from Lossiemouth even before the Islander came down.

Capt. Safranek, who comes from Kingston-on-Thames, walked away unscathed from the wreckage and was flown to Dalcross, where last night he declined to speak to reporters. He was alone in the plane at the time.

The aircraft, call sign G-AXXG, belongs to Air Orkney, but last night their chief pilot, Capt. Ed Bewley, said it was being delivered by another operator for maintenance at Inverness.

Last night everyone involved in the rescue was full of praise for the skill of Capt. Safranek's landing and the swiftness of RAF Lossiemouth's response.

A spokesman for the Civil Aviation Authority said icing of the Islander's carburettor was thought to be the cause of the engine trouble. He said the pilot was forced to land on some high ground and there had been "substantial damage" to the aircraft. It is believed the undercarriage and tail are badly smashed. "It sounds as though he has been very lucky inded", added the spokesman.

The spokesman said the accident had been reported to the accident investigation branch of the Department of Trade, who would be sending a team of investigators to Inverness today.

It is understood that Capt. Safranek was flying for a Glasgow-based air charter firm.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL FRIDAY APRIL 1 1983

Crew to attempt crashed Islander airlift

A BRITISH Airways helicopter crew are standing by at Aberdeen Airport today ready to fly an unusual rescue mission 2000 ft. to the snow-covered Cairngorms.

Weather permitting they plan to take off at first light and airlift a damaged Air Orkney Islander aircraft from a plateau a few miles west of Aviemore and take it to Inverness Airport.

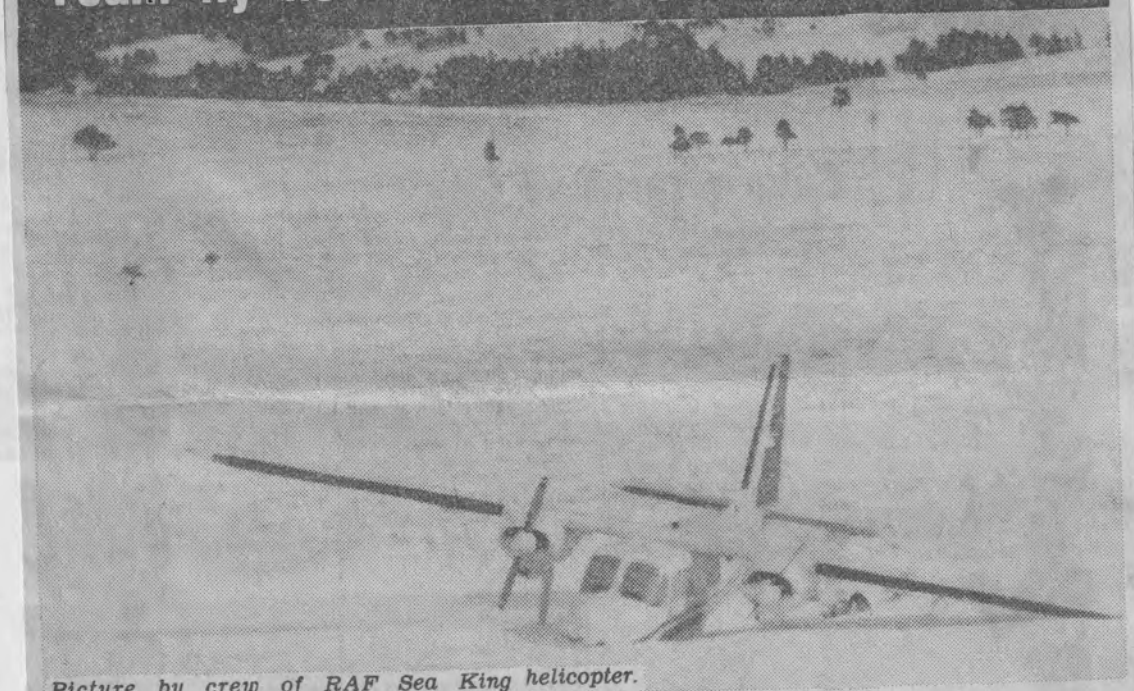
The Islander crash landed near the summit of Carn Sleamhuinn last Thursday after running into engine trouble in freezing conditions during a ferry flight from a Perth maintenance company. The aircraft, in regular use on inter-island flights around Orkney and throughout the North, was being flown by Kingston-on-Thames pilot Capt. Milos Safranek. Engaged to deliver the serviced aircraft to its owners he sent out a mayday over the Cairngorms and managed to put the aircraft down in one piece despite difficult conditions and deep snow.

He escaped injury and stayed with the damaged Islander to maintain radio contact with a rescue helicopter from RAF Lossiemouth which he guided in to his position.

The airlift attempt will be made using a Sikorsky S61-N which will carry the two-ton Islander from a lifting strop slung from the North Sea helicopter's underbelly. The helicopter will have to ease its considerable cargo slowly towards Inverness Airport at no more than 50 knots but should be able to make the journey within 20 minutes.

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL SATURDAY MARCH 26 1983

Team fly north to investigate crash-landing



Picture by crew of RAF Sea King helicopter.

THE Air Orkney Islander which crash-landed on a hilltop near Aviemore on Thursday.

A TEAM of investigators from the Department of trade in London flew north yesterday to launch their inquiry into Thursday night's crash-landing by a light aircraft in the hills near Aviemore.

The twin-engined Islander was forced down in the mountains as it approached Inverness Airport, Dalcross, on a flight from Perth. The pilot, Capt. Milos Safranek, from Kingston-onThames, was unhurt, but the aircraft was damaged. He was alone in the plane.

He was picked up by a Sea King helicopter from RAF Lossiemouth and flown to Dalcross.

Yesterday one of the helicopter crew, W/O Paul Challice, said: "He was quite lucky he found a piece of ground that was level, at the top of the hill, to do a forced landing. He did a god job of getting the aircraft down in one piece."

The helicopter quickly reached the landing spot — about 1700ft. up in the hills — by homing in on the aircraft's radio signals. "He was sitting in the cockpit and the helicopter landed just beside him. He was quite happy to be rescued and there were handshakes all round.

"He told me he had been flying for 42 years and this was the first forced landing," said W/O Challice.

The helicopter was piloted by Flt. Lt. Geoff Clements, and others in the crew were Flying Officer Steve Martin and Winchman Vic Oliver.

The Islander is owned by Air Orkney, but was being delivered by another company for maintenance at Inverness. Icing of the carburettor is believed to have been the cause of the engine trouble, but members of the Department of Trade's accident investigation branch, who flew to Inverness yesterday, will spend the next few days piecing together what happened.

Crashed plane airlifted from hilltop

AN aircraft which crash-landed in the Cairngorms 10 days ago was recovered in a successful "air rescue mission" yesterday.

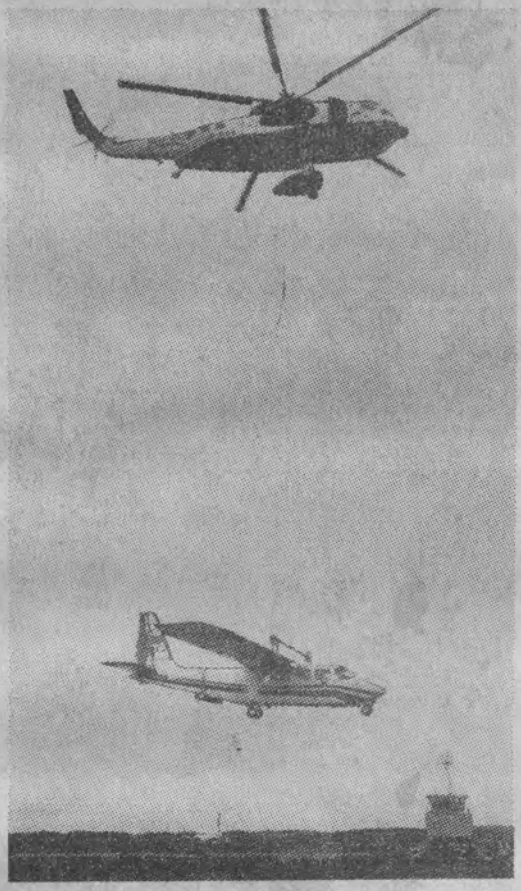
The damaged Air Orkney Islander was lifted from a plateau a few miles west of Aviemore by a British Airways SG1-N helicopter and gently placed on bales of straw at Dalcross Airport, Inverness.

Weather conditions, which had prevented the operation taking place on Saturday, were perfect yesterday and the helicopter, piloted by Capt. John Keeppe, made a successful lift on the third attempt.

The Islander crash-landed after engine trouble in freezing conditions during a ferry flight from a Perth maintenance company.

The aircraft, in regular use on inter-island flights around Orkney and throughout the North, was being flown by Kingston-on-Thames pilot Capt. Milos Safranek, who managed to put the aircraft down in one piece despite difficult conditions and deep snow.

Frozen snow had to be cleared from the aircraft before it could be moved yesterday and a lifting strop was fitted in place before the helicopter arrived.



GENTLY does it . . . The S61-N helicopter about to "land" the Islander aircraft at Dalcross.

"We had just three attempts to get the Islander balanced properly below us," Capt. Keepe said. "But after that the flight went quite smoothly."

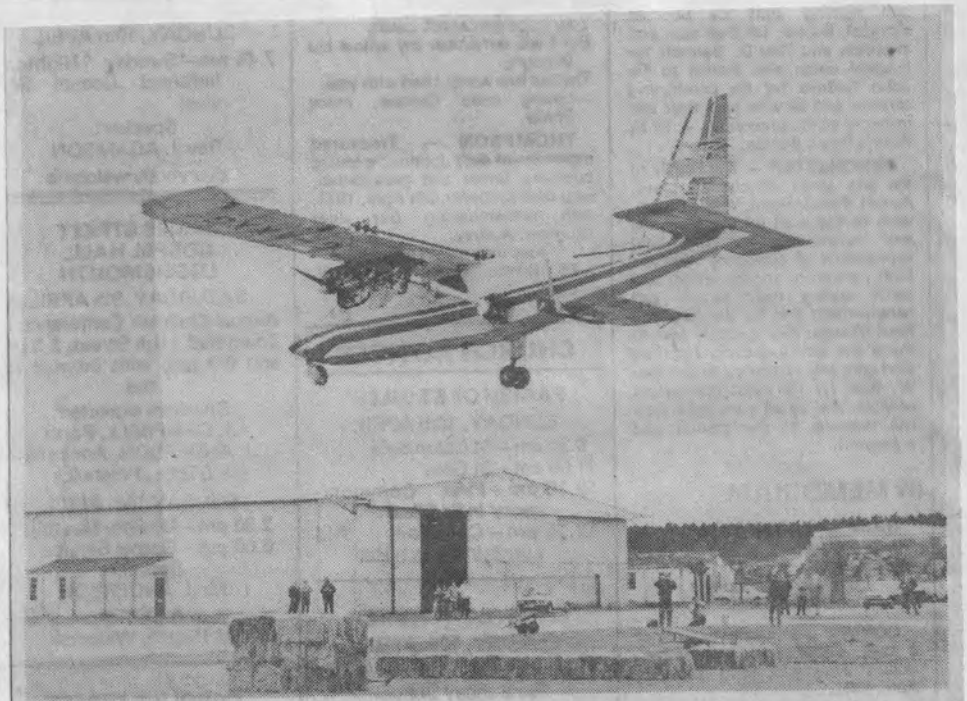
The helicopter flew slowly to Dalcross with the 4000lb. load — the limit it could carry over the distance — and Capt. Keepe, with senior crew man Ray Smith almost put the aircraft down at the first attempt.

The undercarriage of the Islander had been damaged in the crash landing and the BA captain had to try to put the aircraft down on bales of straw to minimise further damage.

All was going well until the downdraught from the North Sea helicopter combined with strong winds on the airfield to blow the heavy straw bales away from under the aircraft.

With considerable manoeuvring from helpers, however, the helicopter eventually "landed" its load safely.

NORTHERN SCOT
9 APRIL 1983.



Thirty feet away from safety after hitching a lift from a 2000ft Cairngorm crash site is Air Orkney's damaged Islander.

CRASH PLANE BROUGHT DOWN FROM PLATEAU

THE BATTERED remains of an Air Orkney Islander were airlifted from a 2000ft Cairngorm plateau on Sunday nearly two weeks after it crash landed three miles west of Aviemore following multiple engine failure.

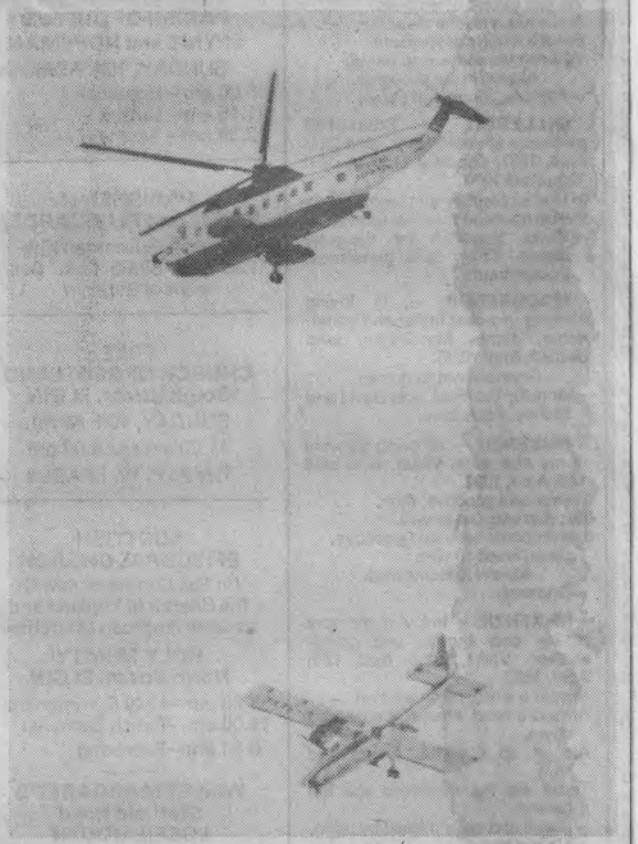
The unusual rescue was accomplished after precision planning by a British Airways Helicopter crew from Aberdeen Airport ensured that the two-ton aircraft could be flown to Inverness Airport slung under the fuselage of a powerful S61-N helicopter more at home on North Sea supply routes.

Flown by Capt John Keepe — a former RAF rotary wing pilot — and First Officer Guy White, the mighty Sikorsky machine hitched up the downed Islander and gingerly eased it off the crash site to the safety of Inverness Airport.

Capt Keepe told "The Northern Scot": "I'd never airlifted a complete fixed-wing aircraft before, but I have had experience of flying underslung helicopter fuselages.

"There's no real difficulty in lifting the Islander — it's just a matter of making sure it's secure, the weather is good and that it does not try and fly itself in the slip-stream."

Flying with the Islander slung 50ft from the underside of the fuselage, the S61-N made the transfer to Dalcross at no more than 50 knots and landed 30 minutes after lift-off from the crash site near Carn Sleamhuinn summit.



The Air Orkney Islander is lifted off the plateau by the British Airways helicopter.

ICING

The aircraft, formerly owned by GKN Steelstock and used as Air Orkney's mainstay for the past three years, came down after engine icing over the Cairngorms forced ferry pilot Capt Milos Safranek to send out a Mayday signal.

The Islander had just completed a routine services inspection at a Perth maintenance unit and was being delivered to Inverness when the accident happened. Capt Sefranek, who comes from Kingston-Upon-Thames, had alerted Moray Radar at Lossiemouth to intermittent engine failures on route and finally declared an emergency when both power units stopped. He carried out a near text book forced landing in difficult conditions and brought the Islander to a halt without injury to himself and relatively minor structural damage to the machine.

He remained with the Islander and maintained radio contact with a Sea King rescue helicopter from RAF Lossiemouth and guided the SAR flight to the scene.

The Islander, now minus its port main undercarriage leg and other damage, will be examined at Dalcross before a decision is taken to repair or write off the aircraft.

Successfully down at Inverness Airport after their muscle-flexing airlift from the snow-covered Cairngorms are British Airways S61-N commander Capt John Keepe (left) and his senior crewman, Ray Smith, whose job was to "con" the pilot and his underslung load to a safe touchdown at Dalcross.

LINDSEY BARRIE t
spent the day with Bri
team at Sumburgh, Sh
men who risk their li

MY EYES closed tightly, I gripped the steel rope of the winch and wished I was safely on board the helicopter hovering above me.

A strong wind blew the winch backwards and forwards; from side to side; round and round. Opening my eyes (just for seconds at a time), I could see snow showers closing in gradually from the distance.

Beneath me — far beneath me — the North Sea was grey, calm, but bitterly cold.

Suddenly, the winch stopped and I was left hanging there in empty space; dangling between sea and aircraft. There were a few heart-stopping tugs on the wire. I was sure I was stuck.

I looked down at the deck of the ship I had just left. It seemed very far away.

After what seemed like an eternity, I felt myself moving upwards once more; hands and face already numbed in biting winds and flurries of snow.

At last, I felt the winchman grab me and pull me inside the helicopter. I was safe.

My first and, I hope, only experience of being winched to safety had truly frightened me — and I knew all the time that I was taking part in a controlled training exercise, not an emergency.

Although the "rescue" seemed to take for ever, it was actually over in minutes, thanks to the skill of the pilot and winchman.

I was spending the day with the men of the British Airways Helicopters search-and-rescue team at Sumburgh in Shetland. I wanted to find out about the work and day-to-day routine of men who risk their lives to save others.

LINDSEY BARRIE looks anxious as she waits for winchman Bill Deacon to pull her on board the helicopter.

BAH have been under contract to the marine division of the Department of Trade since 1980. Their shore-based search-and-rescue (SAR) team is the only non-military one in Britain.

Under contract, BAH must have one helicopter on standby at Sumburgh in daylight hours. Unfortunately, 20% of their call-outs are at night and, although crews are not compelled to go out, goodwill usually means they do.

BAH chief pilot is Capt. Alan Veale, a former Navy man. He flew Sea Kings, the military equivalent of the Sumburgh SAR copters, Sikorsky S61s, before moving to Shetland.

Capt. Veale outlined a typical call-out. "We wait for messages from the coastguard," he said. "Then we have a choice of four types of alert."

The alerts range from normal one-hour call-out to the order for an immediate scramble. During the day, usually, it takes 40 minutes from call-out to take-off.

At the moment, BAH normally provide a day crew and a night crew, although the contract does not demand that.

There are eight full crews in all; each comprising two pilots and two men.

"Most of us have had military SAR experience," said Capt. Veale. "All the winchmen are ex-Royal Navy."

This military background means the men are well used to the demands of training, and keeping at the peak of fitness and readiness. Hard training is vital to the efficiency of search and rescue.

Crews do winching exercises, like the one I took part in, with as many different types of boat and platform as they can.

Only rarely do they have to pick someone out of the water. That unhappy predicament has arisen only once in the past three years.

The SAR crews at Sumburgh have already earned many awards and commendations during BAH's three-year contract.

Already this year, the work of dedicated men like those at Sumburgh has saved numerous lives.

They do not always appear to get full recognition, but their daily readiness and willingness to put their own lives at risk do not go unnoticed.

BACK ON LAND . . . Lindsey with the search-and-rescue team (left to right) — Adrian Jeffs, helicopter cabin crew supervisor; Bill Deacon, winchman; Capt. Tony Wickes, co-pilot on this occasion, and Capt. Alan Veale, chief pilot, BAH, Sumburgh.

RAF bravery awards for helicopter crew

Three crewmen from an RAF Wessex helicopter who are based at Leuchars have been given bravery awards for a daring rescue they carried out over an extremely stormy North Sea last November.

One of the three, Winchman Bob Danes (40), has been awarded a bar to the Air Force Cross. The citation states that he acted "at great risk to his own life" in rescuing seriously ill seamen from a Chinese cargo ship 135 miles out at sea.

The AFC is awarded to officers and warrant officers of the RAF for acts of valour, courage and devotion to duty while flying though not on active service.

The pilot of the helicopter, Flt-Lt. Alan Coy (35) has been awarded the Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air, while the navigator, FLt-Lt. John Ardley (35), receives a commendation from the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Strike Command.

All three men are married and live with their families in the Leuchars area.

The rescue operation occurred on November 19 while the men and their helicopter were on a "familiarisation" visit to RAF Coltishall in Norfolk.

The helicopter was scrambled by the rescue co-ordination centre at Pitreavie in Fife to go to the aid of the 14,000-ton *Kungming* belonging to the Republic of China which had seriously ill seamen on board.

Though the ship was only 40 miles from the Dutch coast 60 knot adverse winds ruled out a rescue operation from Holland. On reaching the vessel Winchman Danes, in spite of 50 ft waves and blinding spray, had himself lowered on the the violently pitching deck which was awash. But for the safety lines rigged by the ship's crew he would almost certainly have been swept away.

None of the ship's crew spoke English and Winchman Danes had to use sign language even to prepare the most seriously ill man for recovery.

The citation states that "at great risk to his own life, and with little assistance, he manoeuvred the stretcher back along the deck to the winching area where he and the casualty were recovered to the aircraft."

It adds: "Undaunted, he then repeated the operation and successfully recovered a second casualty."

Fl-Lt Alan Coy (left), Winchman Bob Danes and Fl-Lt John Ardley line up for photographer Hamish Campbell at RAF Leuchars yesterday.

THE SCOTSMAN Tuesday, April 19, 1983

THE PRESS AND JOURNAL FRIDAY JUNE 17 1983

One man dead – four more feared lost

LOSSIE BOAT WRECK FOUND

A FISHERMAN has died and four others were presumed drowned after a fishing boat was found smashed on rocks off West Sutherland yesterday.

Divers late last night found a body in the wreckage of the Lossiemouth boat Arcadia.

A large-scale air, land and sea search had been mounted earlier for the crew after the 62ft. vessel was discovered split in two on the rocks near Stoer Point.

The boat sailed from Lochinver early on Wednesday.

On board were Skipper Lewis Stewart Smith, Dalvey, Dunbar Street; owner Mr Alexander Flett, Almar, James Street; Mr Edward Wilson, 24 St Gerardine's Road; Mr Patrick Devine, 21 Woodland Walk, and Mr Gordon Stewart, Dunbar Street, all Lossiemouth.

The vessel foundered on rocks underneath the unmanned Stoer Point lighthouse.

Divers were unable to release the body because of the weight of the wreckage.

They will resume their search at first light. They hope the motion of the sea will move the wreckage and allow them to bring the body to the surface.

The rescue services were alerted after a holiday-maker spotted wreckage. He was named last night as Mr Raymond Collier, 16 Ness Road, Fortrose.

A searching RAF helicopter located a boat's wheelhouse lying underwater. The boat was later found to have split in two and to be lying in 20 to 25ft of water.

Two liferafts — one inflated, the other uninflated — were located along with small pieces of debris by the local coastal rescue company.

Mr Flett had fished out of the West Sutherland harbour of Lochinver for 25 years — one of the original Moray Firth skippers who built up the port's reputation as a base for the Minch fleet.

Nothing was heard of the Arcadia after she left Lochinver at 2 a.m. on Wednesday.

No one suspected a tragedy until a holiday-maker, walking the cliffs around Stoer Point lighthouse yesterday afternoon, saw what he thought was the wreckage of a fishing vessel on the beach below. He notified Constable William Sutherland, Lochinver, who alerted the emergency services.

A helicopter from Lossiemouth — ironically there is scheduled to be a search and rescue display involving this squadron with Lochinver lifeboat in aid of charities tomorrow — set out to search the rugged coastline around the point, eight miles north of Lochinver.

The local lifeboat coastguard crew and the Assynt Mountain Rescue Unit went to the area to see if they could trace the crew.

Stornoway coastguards, who organised the search, called out their lifeboat and a diving team to assist the search along the coast.

Meanwhile relatives were informed at Lossiemouth of a tragedy they had never suspected.

Weather conditions in the area were stormy, but not of unexpected proportions.

Stoer Lighthouse is an automatic light, so there were no personnel moving in the remote, picturesque area except for the occasional holidaymaker.

MORAY M.P. Mr Alex Polock said late last night: "this is utterly tragic news, which leaves one stunned with shock.

"The whole community will share the awful sense of loss.

"I myself will be raising the matter in Parliament at the earliest possible moment".

Second tragedy for young wife

By ALASTAIR BISSET

LOSSIEMOUTH was a town in mourning last night as hopes faded for the safety of the crew of the Arcadia.

And for one young wife it was the second time the sea had dealt the cruellest of blows. Mrs Helen Devine, Woodlands Walk, Lossiemouth, was only married last September to one of the Arcadia crew members, Mr Pat Devine (27).

Five years ago she had been widowed when her first husband, Robert Craig, was lost when the Lossiemouth vessel Sapphire went down in the same stretch of water off the West Coast.

Mrs Devine has one daughter by her previous marriage.

At Lossiemouth last night relatives sat huddled round telephones waiting and praying for phone calls that never came.

But as darkness fell, and the news filtered through that even an extensive search by an RAF Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter had proved fruitless, the grim reality of tragedy at sea was being faced.

The Moray coast town had lost five of its fishing stock.

The Arcadia owner's wife, Mrs Marie Flett, of Almar, James Street — who suffers badly from arthritis and who is only just back from a spell in hospital in Aberdeen — said bravely: "We can only hope.

"It was not until about 6.30 p.m. that I heard about it. We were told that wreckage had been spotted. Apparently the boat had hit the rocks. But we have no more details."

Mr Flett (57) had been at sea all his life and until earlier this year he had skippered the Arcadia. He had fished out of Lochinver with the Arcadia for 26 years.

Mr and Mrs Flett have a son, James, and a daughter, Sandra.

Mrs Jean Smith, whose husband, Lewis (42), took over as skipper in January, said: "I just can't take it in. Lewis phoned me on Tuesday night from Lochinver. He said they were hoping to sail either late on Tuesday night or early on Wednesday morning.

"Since then I have heard nothing."

Mr and Mrs Smith have two children, Elaine (14) and Stewart (11).

Until recently Mr Smith worked overseas.

Also on board the Arcadia were two Lossiemouth teenagers — Eddie Wilson (19), 24 St Gerardine's Road, who is single and stays with his parents, Mr and Mrs Wilson, who have two other sons and a daughter, and youngest crew members Gordon Stewart (18), who has been staying with his grandmother in Dunbar Street, Lossiemouth.

His parents belong to Lossiemouth and are meantime in Hull, although they have plans to move back to the Moray town.

The helicopter was called out at 5.30 p.m. to join the search.

It scanned the area for several hours without success.

The helicopter re-fuelled on the West Coast and the crew were preparing to stay overnight so that a new search could be launched at first light today.

Lossie wreck: Fifth body found

THE body of the fifth crew member of the Lossiemouth fishing boat Arcadia — which was wrecked at Stoer Point, West Sutherland, last week — was recovered late yesterday afternoon.

Last Friday, the bodies of skipper Mr Lewis Smith (42), Mr Pat Devine (28), Mr Ed. Wilson (19) and Mr Gordon Stewart (18) were recovered from the wreck by two Stornoway divers.

The coastal search for the fifth crew member, 58-year-old owner Mr Alex Flett of Lossiemouth, had been officially called off by Stornoway coastguards, but one of the Stornoway divers, Mr John M. Macleod, travelled to Lochinver yesterday to take underwater photographs of the wreck for the Department of Transport inquiry and, while diving, he discovered Mr Flett's body about 30 yards from the wreck. The remains were taken on the fishing boat St Kilda to Lochinver.

4 Bodies found

Divers recover Lossie crewmen

THE bodies of four fishermen were recovered from the battered wreck of the Moray fishing boat Arcadia.

Two deep-sea divers risked their own lives off Stoer Point, West Sutherland, to free the bodies.

They are expected to make further dives today in an attempt to find the fifth crew member of the Lossiemouth vessel.

The Department of Trade are to begin an inquiry into the loss of the Arcadia, which mysteriously ran aground and split in two near the unmanned Steer Point lighthouse.

The four bodies were carried ashore by Lochinver lifeboat and taken by police to Inverness for identification by relatives. Last night, the name of the missing crewman was still not known.

The Arcadia's crew were owner Mr Alexander Flett (57), Almar, James Street; Skipper Lewis Smith (42), Dalvey, Dunbar Street; Edward Wilson (19), 24 St Geradine's Road; Mr Patrick Devine (27), 21 Woodlands Walk; and Gordon Stewart (18), 58 Dunbar Street, all Lossiemouth.

Coastguards, lifeboatmen, police and an RAF helicopter crew had spent all day assisting the divers in the search, in the vain hope of finding at least one of the Lossiemouth fishermen alive.

A police spokesman said: "We are no nearer solving the mystery of whathappened, because a fishing boat has nothing like an aircraft's black box to give a hint of what might have gone wrong.

"We are not even certin yet when the Arcadia went down."

A Stornoway coastguard spokesman said last night: "It is a complete mystery. It would be very difficult to put up a possible cause."

After the search had been discontinued for the day, police praised the work of Stornoway divers Mr John MacLeod and Mr Alex Murray.

The police spokesman said: "These two were working in appalling conditions of heavy swell, lots of debris and drifting fishing nets.

"They could so easily have become trapped themselves, but they dived time after time around the wreckage. No words of mine can praise them enough."

The divers had to give up after reaching the limit of their endurance under water.

They discovered one body tangled up in rigging and netting, and part of the wheelhouse wreckage had to be towed away to gain access.

The body was brought up shortly after midday and about an hour later the divers discovered three more bodies.

Wreckage found yesterday morning off Handa Isle, north of where the bodies were recovered, is believed to belong to the 62ft. Arcadia.

It had fresh red antifouling paint on it, and a seat cover and a port light were also found.

A Department of Trade inquiry will be held, Moray M.P. Mr Alex Pollock said last night.

He was speaking after visiting the bereaved families of the Arcadia crew. He went to Lossiemouth on returning to the constituency from London.

"Since Parliament is not sitting today I contacted the Scottish Office direct. The Scottish Secretary has taken a personal interest in the tragedy and has asked to be kept informed."

Mr George Younger sent a special message of concolence yesterday to Mr James Anderson, chairman of Moray District Council.

Mr Younger said he was "greatly saddened" to hear of the tragic loss of the men of the Arcadia. "On behalf of the Government please convey my deepest sympathy to their families."

TEENAGER Edward Wilson, pictured on an earlier fishing trip.

GORDON STEWART ... youngest of crew

WIDOW RELIVES NIGHTMARE

The helicopter heroes

The PRESS and JOURNAL
LANG STRACHT, MASTRICK, ABERDEEN, AB9 8AF Tel.690222
Wednesday, December 7, 1983

YESTERDAY marked the 10th anniversary of the epic rescue of the crew of the trawler Navena — a four-and-a-half-hour drama in which a British Airways Helicopters S61N winched 12 men from the deck of the vessel, aground on the rocks off the island of Copinsay. That was BAH's first major rescue in their 12-year search-and-rescue service, operated in conjunction with the coastguards. On November 30 that contract came to an end, and today FRED PARK looks back over some of the dramas — and lighter moments — of SAR.

A WELCOME sight for anyone in the sea . . . a British Airways Helicopters search-and-rescue S61N hovers overhead and the crewman slowly descends.

AT 1106 hours on November 6, 1971, a British Airways Helicopters S61N took off from Aberdeen on the first sortie of a two-year "trial" contract awarded by the Department of Trade to provide a search-and-rescue service for the northern North Sea.

At the controls were,Captains Ashpole and Price, with crewmen Terry Chappell, Ken Jacobs and Gordon Strathairn on board. The mission — to assist the British freighter Amberleigh, which had lost steering in a Force 8 gale.

When the helicopter arrived at the scene, the crew had succeeded in regaining steering on the Amberleigh and "no further assistance was required".

According to the aircraft's log, the S61N was back at Dyce at 1241: the three crewmen had had a dry run for their first mission, but within one month the SAR service was called out to lift a severely injured seaman from the Danish trawler Viking Bank, this time with Dr David Proctor from Aberdeen's casualty unit on board.

Crewmen on that occasion were Ken Jacobs, Gordon Strathairn and, making his "debut", Ted Clarke, with Captains Price and Hooper at the controls. That mission of 3hr. 20min. duration was a taste of the real thing.

When the last contract ended, on December 31, 1982, BAH had flown more than 130 missions, some more dramatic than others, and their crewmen had amassed an enviable collection of Rescue Shields, Queen's Commendations for Valiant Service in the Air, a Queen's Gallantry Medal and other national and international awards. Throughout 1983, they have operated extensions of the contract until last month.

But the story of search and rescue goes back to the early 1970s, when Danish, Norwegian and American helicopters had been called in to rescue crewmen on two stricken vessels.

At that time there was no British rescue capability using long-range helicopters, but eventually, and after pressure in the Commons, the Coastguard service was given that vital air support.

The first contract went to British Airways Helicopters, operating from the former RAF station at the west side of Aberdeen Airport. Today, only two of the original crewmen are still with BAH, cabin services superintendent Terry Chappell and cabin services supervisor Pete Garland.

With one exception, the crewmen stationed at Sumburgh, to where operations were transferred in 1979, have now transferred to Aberdeen, where they will work on the BV 234s, and will be involved in the development of a new, heavy-lift service using the Boeings.

Coming back to the 1970s, and to the early hours of December 6, when the British fishing vessel Navena ran aground on a reef 600 yards from the rocks on Copinsay.

At 0810 hours an S61N was scrambled from Aberdeen with Captains Evans and Price at the controls. Terry Chappell and Ted Clarke were the crewmen on what was to be the unit's first major search-and-rescue operation.

On the rocks off Copinsay the trawler Navena was badly holed and sinking. On board, a crew of 12, with the ship being battered by Force 10 winds. The weather was so bad that Kirkwall lifeboat took four attempts — and 50 minutes — to get out from port.

Capt. Mike Evans and his crew were over the wreck some two hours after take-off and all 12 members of the Navena's crew were winched safely aboard the helicopter.

They were taken back to Kirkwall, as the trawler broke up on the rocks.

Today, 10 years to the day, the skipper of the Navena, now an Aberdeen taxi driver, still recalls the rescue. He still remembers, too, the names of the pilots and winchmen who saved the lives of the trawler's crew.

"Nothing I can say could sum up the courage of the men on that mission. No words could express our gratitude to them."

Skipper Jim Clark was last to leave the ship on that fateful December morning, when the helicopter was the only chance left for him and his crew.

For that rescue, the crew received the Department of Trade's Rescue Shield for the most outstanding rescue of the year and a Queen's Commendation.

For a brief spell it was back to routine "casevac" and "medevac" sorties and land-and-sea searches, plus the never-ending routine of training exercises.

By the time of the Navena, the team of winchmen and pilots had formed a rapport that made verbal communications almost unnecessary. Training had made sure that the teams could really work together: the Navena showed just what that teamwork could achieve, under the worst possible conditions in the North Sea.

The New Year celebrations to herald 1974 were "out" for the duty SAR crews, who, only four days into 1974, were scrambled to assist the Polish trawler Nurzec, aground at Murcar, north of Aberdeen.

Pete Garland and Ken Jacobs were the crewmen who had to attempt the dangerous task of winching up survivors from the storm-tossed seas and the deck of the vessel.

They rescued four men from the trawler, in pitch darkness and in the teeth of a Force 10 gale; they recovered three bodies from the beach before having to return to base.

Next day, they pulled the last four men to safety from the trawler.

But it was from Sumburgh, not Aberdeen, that one of the most dramatic rescues was to be carried out, again in the early days of December — again in Force 10 gales. On December 9, 1977, an S61N was scrambled from Sumburgh, with Captains Bain and Bosanquet and crewman Brian Johnstone, to go to the aid of the fishing vessel Elinor Viking, foundering on the rocks off the Skerries.

After a search hampered by darkness and foul weather, the helicopter located the boat and lifted four of the crew on board. Below, the lifeboat could not reach the Elinor Viking, which was rapidly breaking up, and the helicopter made a second and successful attempt to rescue the four remaining crewmen on the boat.

That rescue earned no fewer than nine top awards, including two Queen's Gallantry Medals and the US Coast Guard Captain Kessler Award.

In 1978, it was decided to position the search-and-rescue service at Sumburgh, the first sortie from there being flown on June 19, 1979. But the last rescue performed from Aberdeen also lived up to the spectacular tradition of SAR. On December 16, crewmen Jacobs and Garland, with pilots Buckley and Ingledew, went to the aid of a crewman on the bulk oil tanker Dinos M. The seaman had been overcome by fumes and BAH winchman Pete Garland was lowered to the deck of the tanker.

The helicopter returned to base and Pete Garland made three attempts to rescue the seaman and bring him up on deck. Using breathing apparatus for an hour and a quarter, Pete Garland finally got the seaman topside, but the man was dead.

For his part in this rescue, Garland received a Royal Humane Society award.

The annals of SAR are packed with examples of skill and outstanding courage, but the service also had its lighter moments, many of which are still fresh in the minds of the crews, and are oft-quoted in after-dinner speeches.

Common to many of these anecdotes is a dummy which the BBC had presented to the SAR unit. The dummy was used regularly in exercises, and for more light-hearted pursuits — on occasion.

"Fred", as British Airways Helicopters had christened the dummy, was found lurking in some strange and often out-of-bounds places. He was also used as a "victim" in rescue exercises.

On one occasion a TV crew were on location, filming with BAH, the script calling for a young female personality of the time to be winched off the deck of a (wrecked) trawler in a stretcher.

The Sheriffmuir, off Balmedie, was the location, but the star of the show declined, I am told, to be winched up. So Fred was strapped in, and lowered from the helicopter to the set.

Cameras on the beach were whirring — when Fred fell out!

Vital to the story is the fact that the camera crew did not know of the last-minute substitution, of the dressing of Fred in the star's apparel.

Their horror at the sight of the rapidly-descending figure was compounded tenfold when a BAH crewman wandered up to the body — now spread-eagled on the sand — and delivered a hefty kick which decapitated the victim.

That story I heard so often that it must be true, but some of the feats attributed to Fred (who also transferred to Sumburgh) defy belief.

The last wet winching "rescue" carried out by BAH was in support of "The Press and Journal" Cavitron appeal, when I was winched from the sea off Bressay — and, although I knew I was going to be rescued, I was more than a little relieved to see the winchman descending, with the rescue strap held out. I now know that even an S61N with the main door removed to accommodate the winchgear is a warm and welcome place compared with the sea.

In 12 years that relief has been felt by hundreds of men and women whom British Airways have rescued, but the last word comes from Mr David Mitchell, Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Department of Transport, in a letter dated November 24, 1983, to BAH's managing director, Mr M. C. Ginn.

That letter expressed "the Government's appreciation of 12 years of service, bravery and courage — exceptional airmanship".

It concluded: "You and your staff involved in that contract can take justifiable pride in a job well done — and appreciated."

That, on behalf of those hundreds rescued, says it all.

RAF loses last link with World War

Master Signaller George Canning returning from a last flight in the RAF enjoying a rather exceptional glass of champagne with Wing Commander Langrill, Wing Commander Lewis, Acting Stn Cdr and Squadron Leader Gault.

By a Correspondent

MASTER Signaller George Canning, reputed to be the last of the WW 11 aircrew still on active flying service in the Royal Air Force, was dined out of the Royal Air Force on Saturday in Beaumaris. The main speaker was Air Vice Marshal Tetley, Commander of the Northern Maritime Air Region.

George, a modest unassuming man, joined the Royal Air Force volunteer Reserves in July 1941, when he was only 16 by lying about his age.

His early days in the Royal Air Force saw him ferrying aircraft across the Atlantic before he was posted to a Dakota Squadron as a Wireless Operator and Air Gunner. He vividly remembers dropping paratroopers into France on D Day before becoming involved in the nine-day Arnhem battle.

"Before Arnhem our job was to drop supplies into France. Arnhem was a secret mission and we were briefed only a couple of hours before we left."

George was over Arnhem twice during the 9 days: "The first time we towed a glider in, along with many other aircraft all releasing their gliders and we all came home thinking how simple the operation had been. However a couple of days later we were back and encountered a great amount of flak."

George was in the Far East at the age of 21 when the war ended and he left the Royal Air Force to join the Merchant Navy, but after 3 years at sea he found himself yearning for the life of the Royal Air Force again and so he enlisted as a Signaller in 1950.

Out of the past 35 years Master Signaller George Canning has spent 12 at RAF Valley. He was first posted to Valley in 1962 for helicopter training.

George's long list of medals include the General Service Medal (Borneo) in '65, Long Service and Good Conduct Medal in '64, the General Service Clasp and Malay Peninsular Medals in 1967, the Air Force Cross in 1979 and the Meritorial Service Medal in 1981.

Although George has served in Bally Kelly and Cyprus since rejoining in 1951 most of his duties have kept him in the UK. His love of helicopters and his ability to be in control in dangerous situations led him naturally into the Search and Rescue world, where he is much respected. George will not talk about his rescue missions, as, he says, "it is unfair to discuss a mission as each rescue involves a victim. I enjoy Search and Rescue work for the challenge and for the satisfaction of a mission successfully completed by the team. It is very much team work."