

Lifeboat Services



CREW TRAPPED AND INJURED BY PIER SUPPORT

Atlantic damaged while saving girls trapped in heavy surf under pier

For the first time in the history of the RNLi the three-man crew of an Atlantic class lifeboat have been awarded a Silver and two Bronze Medals for a single service. This remarkable achievement by Brighton lifeboat is also the first time in more than 20 years - and only the second in the whole 30-year history of inshore lifeboats - that all three crew members have received Medals for Gallantry.

The Silver Medal has been awarded to the helmsman, Richard Pearce, and Bronze Medals to both crew members, Martin Ebdell and Edward Purches, following the rescue of two girls trapped under Brighton Palace Pier on the night of 7/8 September 1995.

In an amazing service the lifeboat was working underneath Brighton pier in darkness and surf up to 4m high to rescue the two girls who had been swept into the sea and were clinging to the pier's supports. To reach them helmsman Pearce had to manoeuvre in a very tight space and in dangerous surf while hampered by a deflated bow section which had been punctured on an underwater spike. The lifeboat managed to reach the terrified girls although crew member Ebdell's leg was trapped and his finger broken when the lifeboat was pinned under a metal support. At one stage the lifeboat appeared to have been lost, and other lifeboatmen prepared to enter the sea from the shore in order to help.

Command

In his official report Martyn Smith, deputy divisional inspector of lifeboats for the east says, 'Helmsman Pearce took firm command of the lifeboat and exhibited clear logical thought. He remained calm despite the conditions and the damage sustained by the lifeboat. He exhibited determination, courage and quite remarkable feats of seamanship. Both Ebdell and Purches also exhibited courage, determination and selflessness. Communication between the three crew was difficult because of the conditions and the fact that the crew acted as one with



little or no verbal communication is indicative of a high level of teamwork and personal initiative. To be able to work undeterred in a badly damaged lifeboat, underneath a pier in appalling conditions without regard to personal safety is nothing short of outstanding'.

'With the damaged bow now pinned down by the support a huge wave swept right over them'

The service had begun at 2356 on 7 September 1995 when coastguard auxiliary N. Gilbert called the station on VHF from near Brighton Palace Pier. Two girls had been swept into the sea, been caught by the undertow and were now trapped under the pier, some 20 yards offshore.

The Atlantic 21 inshore lifeboat *Graham Hillier and Tony Cater* was fully manned as the result of an earlier service and was



*Brighton
East Division*

launched immediately. The wind was onshore at about Force 4 to 5, but earlier in the day a SW gale had been blowing and even when the wind eased and veered north during the service the seas and surf remained high. Helmsman Pearce was surprised by their viciousness so close inshore, and the moonless night made reading them very difficult. The capsized lights and a hand held search light were used to help, but the passage to the pier was both difficult and dangerous with the conditions close to the limit for the lifeboat.

Only the approximate position of the casualties was known, so the lifeboat went through under the pier for a closer look, using a gap marked by a buoy. Once committed to the manoeuvre she had to travel at the speed of the waves, staying between two crests to avoid being caught by the following breaker. She was only some twenty yards off the beach and any misjudgement could have disastrous in the heavy, dumping surf.

Spike

As the lifeboat passed through the pier the casualties were spotted, and helmsman Pearce made a very skilful turn to approach them, keeping close to the seaward supports to give enough searoom to avoid being thrown back onto the next set. Suddenly, while manoeuvring in this confined space under the pier and being swept by heavy surf, the port sponson burst as an unseen metal spike was driven into it. The spike also caught the lifeline, and the forward securing point was ripped from the boat with a sound like a pistol shot. The bow and part of the sponson immediately deflated, leaving the lifeboat open to the seas. However, Helmsman Pearce used both throttles to slew the lifeboat head to sea, and held her there against the crossmembers to which the casualties were clinging.

Both crew members made their way forward and tried to encourage the girls



Some idea of the terrifying conditions experienced that night can be gained from this photo of dumping surf around Brighton Pier.

The lifeboat was operating among the pier supports on a pitch-dark moonless night with a 4m high swell surging through them.

to jump. The nearer girl was grabbed by Purches and brought aboard just as a wave threw the lifeboat astern, where she fell into a trough and then surged forward again, trapping Ebdell's legs under a crossmember. With the damaged bow now pinned down by the support a huge wave swept right over them. Helmsman Pearce looked down as the stern was lifted high above the trapped bow and lost sight of the damaged bow, the crew and the casualties below him. From the shore the propellers could be seen clear of the water, and the deafening noise of the racing engines could be heard clearly.

By now other lifeboatmen had arrived on the beach wearing dry suits and lifejackets and were preparing to rope themselves together and go into the surf to try to help—but the lifeboat reappeared and could be seen to be operational although damaged.

Ebdell's legs came free as the lifeboat dropped into the next trough and, as another wave passed over them, he managed to grab the arm of the second casualty. Neither crew members could see the other or the casualty, but they hung on and pulled her aboard in the following trough.

Relieved

Helmsman Pearce had lost sight of everyone and was afraid that they had gone under the pier support. If so, they would be on the opposite side of it and he would not be able to pull the lifeboat out astern. However, as the bow rose for the second or third time he was relieved to see that the two crew members were safe and that both casualties were on board.

Purches and Ebdell both shouted to the helmsman to pull clear, which he was able to do without any further damage to the lifeboat, although as they cleared the pier another wave crashed through the boat washing both crew aft. However,

they wedged themselves into secure positions between the console and the sponsons where they were able to deal with the two casualties, who were distressed and suffering from hypothermia. One of them was lapsing into unconsciousness. Crew member Ebdell was also in considerable pain from a broken finger, severe bruising and a twisted knee.

Once clear of the pier, Pearce manoeuvred into a relatively quiet area of water, where it became clear that the damage to the lifeboat was considerable, so the righting bag at the stern was inflated as a precaution while taking stock of the situation. The Atlantic was too badly damaged to continue the service unaided, she could not be beached because of the surf and the third option of going alongside the pier steps was also out of the question because of the rise and fall in the rough sea.

Traumatised

In the circumstances it was decided to wait for the arrival of the Coastguard helicopter, with a view to lifting the girls and transferring the lifeboat crew to the Newhaven all-weather lifeboat which was also on the way.

However, when the helicopter arrived it was clear that it was unwise to try and lift the casualties because of their traumatised state and the condition of the lifeboat. So, when Newhaven's Arun class lifeboat *Keith Anderson*, arrived on scene at 0047 the casualties and the Brighton lifeboatmen were taken aboard and the Atlantic taken in tow.

The casualties were landed at Brighton Marina at approximately 0120 and taken to the Royal Sussex County Hospital together with crew member Ebdell.

The damaged lifeboat was rehoused until a relief lifeboat could be placed on service – which was in place by 1200 the next day.

Minehead lifeboat men a 'tremendous help' during floods

The crew of Minehead's lifeboats and the station's shore helpers all came in for praise when some of the worst storms in living memory battered the north Somerset town for four days in late January.

Although the town's lifeboats were not used on this occasion (RNLI inshore lifeboats have been used inland!) the lifeboatmen were able to help residents put up sandbags, barricade windows and clear drains which became blocked with seaweed as the wind stayed onshore, from the east through to north-east, for successive high waters.

The local 'West Somerset Free Press' remarked that 'the town's lifeboat crews turned out to help in the battle even though they were not officially summoned' and also quoted the spokesman for the residents of one of the hardest hit areas, Quay Street, as saying: 'the lifeboatmen gave tremendous help' during the emergency, adding that 'they have an affinity with the people who live here'.

The lifeboat house, further along Quay Street, did not suffer any damage.