

# SAR

## Search and rescue

that it was decided the street lighting in the area must be disconnected, but, when the coastguard pointed out that any mishap that might occur could be aggravated by lack of illumination, it was decided to delay the start of pumping to daylight.

Problems also arose over tugs. There were delays and procrastination over the availability and hire of suitable vessels in the immediate locality, but fortunately Clyde MRCC was able to arrange the services of the large naval tug *Rollicker*. Condensing the concern and the problems of the next two days, suffice to say that by mid-afternoon on 23 January the cargo was offloaded, temporary repairs effected, warship *Brinton* in a policing rôle was keeping waterborne sightseers at a distance, and the coastguard GP boat was in the water. *Rollicker* had lines aboard and took the strain and, at 1445, to the sound of steel tearing on rock, *Regitze Tholstrup* was successfully refloated.

An important lesson learned during this incident concerns gas venting. On LPG tankers under normal running conditions, gas is vented through the main engines and out by the mast top vent. During a situation when the main engine is out of commission, any gas that is vented is passed straight to the mast top vent in an untreated or explosive state. The potential hazard this presents and the precautions which must be observed must be an ever-present concern of all in the area.

Another lesson which we have all learned, but which this incident once again emphasised, is the paramount importance of good communications. The quality of the equipment in the coastguard service was the key factor in our ability to take command and control of a

When a heavy gale hit the west coast of Scotland, considerable damage was done to the coaster *Mingary*.

Photo: Campbeltown Courier and Argyllshire Advertiser



complex and constantly developing situation.

As with all such incidents, the *Regitze Tholstrup* story was not without luck or humour.

The casualty, if it had to be, could hardly have chosen a better site with a good class road adjacent – some hundreds of yards to the north and the story might have had a different ending. As might also have been the case if the forecast force 10 had developed. A technical point of interest might be the road tankers method of ascertaining intake. The driver, armed with a large wooden mallet, slams the side of the bowser – BOING – BOING – BOING – BOING – DONK! With a smile at the pale faced onlookers cowering behind any available cover, 'Dat's where 'tis up to. 'Tis full up to dere'!

The incident was a fine example of inter-service co-operation, with all parties working toward a common goal. Possibly the most significant sign of coastguard professionalism came not with their smooth and unruffled communications, their organising abilities, or their equipment brought and used; after all that is what coastguards are trained to do – but rather the way advantage was taken of what was happening anyway. By the second day of the incident, the area adjacent to the casualty was being used for the changeover of the ciné projector and coastguard film, for passing drill money south to north and, of course, for trying to purloin each other's ball point pens.

## Efficient VHF comms

By John Douglas, RC, Clyde SRR

On 17 December a deep depression crossed Scotland from the west, bringing with it exceptionally severe weather conditions in the form of winds which were recorded as gusting to force 12, and seas estimated by experienced observers to be over 60 feet at times.

At 0945Z, near Skerryvore in position 56°02' north 07°10' west, the small 1500-ton British coaster *Mingary* put out a mayday call, and reported that her starboard bulwark had carried away, and that she was taking water. She asked for another vessel to stand by her. Two other vessels responded, but could not reach *Mingary*, due to the extreme weather conditions. Coastguards asked RCC Edinburgh to divert a Nimrod aircraft to the scene. Islay lifeboat was launched, but kept in shelter at the north end of the Sound of Islay. Barra lifeboat was also alerted, but not launched. Master of *Mingary* told Oban MRSC that he was trying to make shelter at the southern end of Mull. Communications on VHF, through the new high point station on Tiree to Oban MRSC, were excellent. The situation seemed to be well under control when *Mingary* went silent. We now know that she was pooped by an enormous wave which put virtually everything out of action except for her main engines. She had no power, no compass, no lifeboats, and one of the liferafts inflated without help from the crew. The situation was so bad that *Mingary* fired red flares and made SOS by torch to the Nimrod aircraft.

It had originally been intended, on receipt of the first mayday, that two Sea King helicopters would be sent from 819 squadron at Prestwick, but due to the weather conditions at Prestwick, difficulty was

experienced in getting them out of the hangar and airborne. However, on receipt of the second mayday, the urgency of the situation required emergency measure. It was very much to the credit of the 819 squadron aircrew and ground staff that the Sea Kings took off for the scene. By 1530, the helicopters had made contact with *Mingary*, but by this time the master and his crew had realised there was some chance of saving the vessel. The helicopters were therefore allowed to return to Prestwick. *Mingary* was now making for shelter in Tiree, and in the meantime other vessels, including the Russian vessel, *Inzhener Krielis*, were involved in the incident. It was the Russian ship which stood by *Mingary* eventually, but shortly after dark at about 1730 red flares were again sighted, this time from Fionphort on the Isle of Mull in the direction of the casualty.

Once more 819 squadron responded to the call, and by 2230 one of the Sea King helicopters had lowered a winchman to the deck of the *Mingary*. The master reported that the situation was under control, and that he had not fired the red flares. The helicopters returned to base, and the Icelandic vessel *Kljafoss*, HMS *Heckla* and the Russian vessel, all proceeded about their normal business. By midnight *Mingary* was under shelter at Tiree, and later escorted to Campbeltown for repairs. The sector officer at Campbeltown loaned the master a portable VHF radio for communications. The damage to *Mingary* was considerable. Captain Bedingfield and his crew saved their vessel and themselves, a very fine example of courage and seamanship in extreme weather conditions. The rescue services did not have to play out the final act of actual rescue, but nevertheless their contribution to a difficult situation was considerable. There is no doubt that the presence of the rescue services and other ships and good communications enabled the situation to be retrieved in a most effective way. Had the rescue services not been watching over the *Mingary* there might have been a very different end to this story.

The old SAR lesson of 'Save the Ship – Save the Crew' was relearned, but above all, efficient coastguard VHF communications enabled us to be effective co-ordinators. One shudders to think what confusion and misunderstanding would have occurred in an incident of this type a year or two ago. The VHF channel 16 logs during the *Mingary* incident give ample proof of this question showing coastguards to be in control of events – as they should be.

## Three deaths

In the first fortnight of January, there were three deaths at sea in Clyde region: all three were professional fishermen. One was the skipper of his vessel, another was a diver. In all three cases prolonged searches were carried out, possibly beyond what might be considered reasonable in the water temperature conditions prevailing. The first two can almost certainly be put in a category of 'there but for the grace of God, go I'. It is often all too easy on a dark night, having just woken up, to be thrown off balance while in the act of attending to a call of nature. Once in the water then one's chances diminish rapidly. That is, unless the vessel has a good 'man overboard' drill. I rather suspect that for many