

Dun Laoghaire's RNLI team landed a valuable catch when they hauled a fishing boat and its six crew to safety earlier this month, but tackling Dublin's stormy seas is all in a night's work for these brave volunteers, writes **Yvonne Gordon**

**Net gains** Vessels depend on the Dun Laoghaire lifeboat crew, whose members include, from left, Kiernan O'Connell, Eamon O'Leary, Damian Payne, Jack Shanahan, Adam O'Sullivan, and Mark McGibney

**K**iernan O'Connell is recalling the dramatic night two weeks ago that he and his fellow Royal National Lifeboat Institution volunteer crewmembers spent eight hours rescuing a fishing boat off the coast of Dublin. "That's why I have those

up there," he says, pointing to two Sacred Heart pictures above a seat on the Dun Laoghaire RNLI lifeboat. "There are times you're frightened."

There was little time for fear in the early hours of February 3. Scallop dredger the *Argonaut IV* was working east of the Kish Bank in the Irish Sea when a discarded trawler net got caught in its propeller.

The stricken boat made a distress call to the Irish Coast Guard, which in turn contacted Dun Laoghaire RNLI in Co Dublin at 2.50am. The lifeboat crew — the station has up to 30 available at any one time — were all in bed when their pagers went off. Incredibly, the lifeboat was launched within 20 minutes. Video footage of the rescue went viral online.

David Branigan, who was duty coxswain on the night, soon realised he was taking his men into hazardous weather conditions. "The wind was west-northwest, severe gale 9," he recalls. "There were fairly flat seas close to land, but as we moved further offshore, the

waves started to build up. We were getting average 3 metre-high seas at times, depending on where we were — sandbanks and shallow areas give different wave anomalies.

"Sandbanks are a hazard, and there's shipping [to consider] as well, not just the sea state. You don't want to end up with your own propellers fouled [tangled]. There are a load of hazards and they become magnified when conditions become more extreme."

The *Argonaut IV* had been floating at sea for three hours, being tossed and turned by the waves, and the fishermen were very glad to see the lifeboat arriving. "That night the weather was poor. We were fishing on a leeward shore, that's why we were there because of the forecast," says Dan Clark, the fishing boat's skipper.

"The net got fouled which caused a horrible, messy, dangerous night. We caught the net and the propeller sucked it in. The boat

was completely immobilised. I couldn't turn, I had no propulsion at all. The wind was strong — we had gusts of up to 50 knots. When we got fouled it was 2.5m to 3m swell. By the time the lifeboat came, the seas were about 4.5 and 5m high."

The next challenge was to connect a tow rope from the lifeboat to the fishing vessel, which is hazardous in extreme conditions, so it was all hands on deck for that night's seven-strong lifeboat crew: Branigan, 49, O'Connell, 51, Jack Shanahan, 44, Alan Keville, 40, Damian Payne, 34, Gary Hayes, 31, and Michael O'Connor, 25.

High winds, poor visibility and rough sea conditions meant it took around an hour and several attempts to finally establish a link between the 14m, 25-ton lifeboat and the massive 25m, 200-ton dredger.

"We had to make a number of

passes in the heavy waves to throw a heaving line across to connect the tow," says Branigan. "Throwing a light line into 40 or 50 knots of wind, it gets carried away, so there's a bit of trial and error."

At one point the rope got tangled around the lifeboat's radar. O'Connell had to climb the lifeboat's mast in the heavy swell to cut it free — a particularly dangerous operation but necessary to save a key navigation

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instrument. The line also got tangled in the lifeboat's search light and was seconds away from pulling it out, which could have damaged the boat or caused serious injury.

"The main problem was the wind," says Clark. "It was so strong, trying to attach their boat to ours. We were lying fine; there was more fear for the lifeboat's boys, them being small and going up and down the waves. We're 200 tons. We were going up and they were going down. It was very scary stuff."

Once the tow line was secured, the tiny lifeboat attempted to pull the massive fishing boat back to land, into wind and tide, bashing into the waves. Because of the conditions, progress was "painfully slow" at two or three knots. To make things worse, the tow line parted three times once they were under way.

Each time, the crew had to recover the line, set it up and go around again to re-establish the tow, losing ground each time to the wind and tide. The challenge was not only to get the tow line back, but also to make sure they were all safely attached with harnesses and not in any danger. With the wind noise, even communicating with each other was tricky.

Dawn broke at 7.30am, as the boats made slow progress towards land. It got easier as they neared the shelter of Howth harbour. They called the Howth lifeboat crew out to assist with final manoeuvres, and brought the fishing vessel alongside the pier at 10.40am.

Clark acknowledges that fishermen like him are hugely grateful for lifeboat crews and the work they do, risking their lives to help others. "It was a horrible, horrible night, the early hours of the morning, yet they were there on call, voluntarily," he says.

The skipper hails from Scotland and has been going to sea for 22 years, but reveals this was the first time he required rescue. "I have been fouled before and had

breakdowns and always managed to get home," he says. "I have had the lifeboat out for injuries and helicopters for serious injuries. We had a death on board six years ago. But this was the first time we had a lifeboat actually assist us back to port."

Clark notes ruefully that a companion boat working with the dredger had just gone in to harbour. "We usually work in teams — nine times out of 10 we have a friend with us. That night we were on our own."

Branigan says that although there was no immediate risk to life on the fishing vessel, with no steering, they could have very quickly ended up in a shipping lane or on the shallows of Kish Bank. "What you're trying to do is get in there early enough to avoid the situation becoming worse."

On board the *Anna Livia* in Dun Laoghaire harbour just three days later, the lifeboat is once again ready for service — as it was immediately after returning to shore that morning. The crew have a new tow rope laid out on deck: it's 185m long and heavy.

Everything about the job on the *Anna Livia* looks tough. Recalling the rescue, crew members explain how tiring it was to haul all of the wet

## Answering the call

So far this year, Dun Laoghaire RNLI has had four callouts and rescued seven people. Last year it launched its two lifeboats — an inshore boat and a larger all-weather boat, 48 times, rescuing 50 people. But then, volunteer lifeboat crew all around Ireland were kept busy in 2015, with 1,098 launches bringing 1,244 people to safety.

Ireland's lifeboat crew were on call in all weathers and 416 of the launches were carried out in the hours of darkness. Howth lifeboat station in Dublin was the busiest on the coast, with 60 launches and the next busiest was Clifden RNLI in Galway with 49 launches.

The type of incidents the crew are called to include danger of drowning (66 launches), missing people searches (54 launches), grounded or stranded vessels (126 launches) and

people thought to be in danger or overdue (118 launches). For machinery failure and fouled propellers, there were 251 callouts.

There were also a number of callouts for animals, including a stranded dolphin (Ballycotton), a horse swept into a river (Lough Derg), eight cows stranded in the sea (Kinsale) and seven dogs in difficulty. Many such callouts include danger to people as they attempt to save an animal and in turn get into difficulty.

To become a member of the RNLI (Shoreline membership is €40 a year and the children's club, Storm Force, is €10 a year), to fundraise, or to make a donation, call 01 895 1800 or visit the RNLI website. All funds raised in Ireland are spent in Ireland.

[rnl.org](http://rnl.org)

Wave of support RNLI video footage of the recent Dun Laoghaire rescue was shared online



rope back on to the deck, reset it and then throw it to the fishing vessel again and again. Looking up at the small mast, O'Connell recalls climbing it in the middle of the night out at sea; the boat pitching and rolling in violent waves. The spot where the coxswain stands, on a flying bridge on top of the lifeboat, looks exposed and vulnerable. Even inside, at the navigation station, Damian Payne explains how hard it can be to draw a straight line on a chart when the boat is heaving.

While there is always a risk to the lifeboat crew during a call, they offset this by training regularly. Their skills range from seamanship to first aid, and they regularly undergo courses in everything from search and rescue to technical subjects. Recovering fatalities is one of the worst parts of the job, and they have also trained in suicide awareness. When they are called, they don't know what any situation will bring. The RNLI lifeboat at Padstow on the coast of Cornwall in England, for example, was recently at sea for 34 hours. "That's why we train," says Branigan.

All that training does not stop their loved ones worrying, however. During call-outs, the crew's families wait for news, as does Dun Laoghaire lifeboat operations manager Stephen Wynne, who co-ordinates matters on shore with the Coast Guard, monitoring VHF communications during a rescue and awaiting the crew's return. Of the seven crew on the call that night, six had children.

"They are all trained, but no matter how highly trained you are,

it doesn't stop something going wrong," says Wynne. "I always worry for the crew when they are at sea, irrespective of what job it is. And I worry for their partners as well, especially on a long job, until they come back, safe and sound."

The crew are keen to emphasise that their successes are shared by anyone who puts a coin in an RNLI collection box. "People assume that there's only one way of volunteering — by manning the lifeboat — but without the donations and people standing out in the rain collecting we wouldn't have the equipment to do our job correctly, we wouldn't have the training, so they are just as important," says Payne. "You don't have to go out to sea to make an important contribution."

What happened in Dun Laoghaire happens in the 45 RNLI stations all around Ireland. Back on land after a rescue, the crew still have to turn up the next morning for their day jobs. Incredibly, they don't always receive gratitude from those they save.

"It's not about thanks," says Branigan. "You just get the job done and people are able to go home to their own families and that's it — everyone goes home safe, well. A bonus is no damage, nobody hurt, nobody dead, and we're all here to do it again."

"We come ashore, put the boat away, refuel, wash it down, put the gear away and get on with your life." O'Connell repeats the institution's old saying: "Drown you may but go you must."

"You just go out there," he says.

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