

TALK TO THE HEROISM CONFERENCE, KINGS COLLEGE LONDON – JUNE -
BY BRIAN WEAD

I am a Senior Manager within the Operations Department of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, at our headquarters in Poole in Dorset.

My particular function in life is that I head a team, which processes all the Institution's reports of each and every lifeboat launch and all incidents, which our lifeguards deal with. As a result of this work, I also administer all forms of recognition for merit and courage that the RNLI bestows.

The Organisation

To give you the wider picture first. We are a charity, founded on 4 March 1824 to save lives from, initially, Shipwreck. Within 16 days the King, then George IV, agreed to become our Patron and the institution became "Royal" on 20 March 1824. Our charter bestows the right to award medals or give pecuniary awards to those who rescue others from the sea.



The RNLI currently has a fleet of 342 craft at 235 lifeboat stations around the coasts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, including 4 here in London on the Thames and some inland waters, such as the South Broads in Suffolk, Lough Erne in Ireland and Loch Ness in Scotland. These lifeboats are on call for 24 hours every day.



We also provide a professional, uniformed daytime lifeguard service on 142 beaches in the South West, Wales, East Anglia and the North East, from April to September, although a few beaches have a longer operational period. The roll out of our lifeguard service will continue over the coming years.



Operationally, the organisation is split into 6 divisions, surprisingly named North, South, East, West, Scotland and Ireland, and each is the responsibility of a Divisional Inspector.

RNLI Divisional Structure

North	South	East	West	Scotland	Ireland
33 stations	35 stations	43 stations	36 stations	45 stations	43 stations
15 beaches	90 beaches	8 beaches	28 beaches	Nil beaches	Nil beaches

In 2008 our lifeboats launched 8293 times and our lifeguards dealt with 9536 incidents, which the wizard mathematicians amongst you will have already worked out that my office dealt with 17829 reports for 2008.

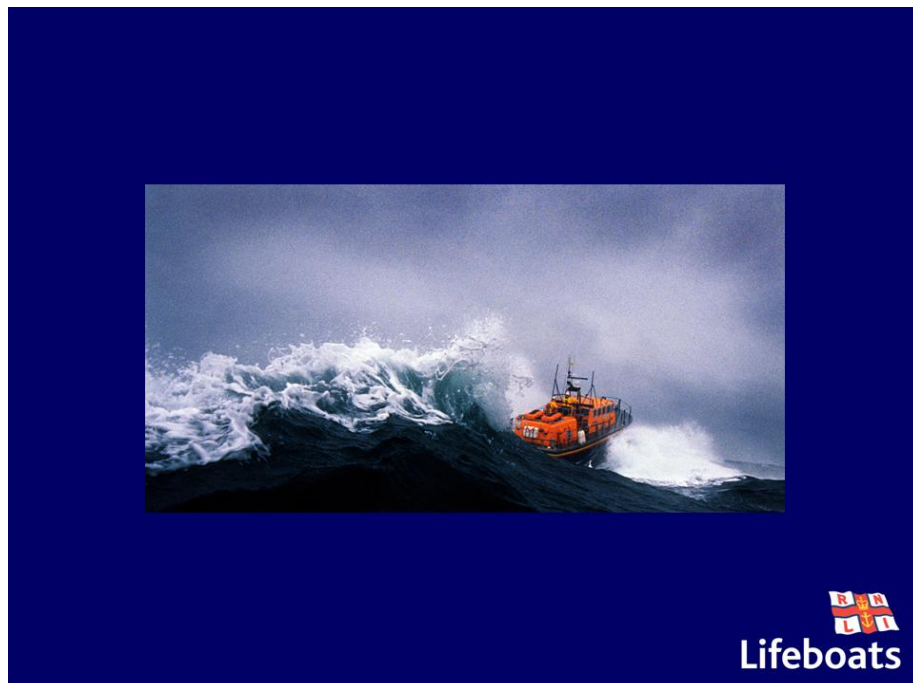
The Process

As we are part of Operations my team's role is to scrutinise and assess the effectiveness of our service, and as well as looking at how the boats or equipment performed, the individuals' actions are looked at.

We have a formal referral system to ensure that any act of merit by a crew member or lifeguard is brought to his, or her, Inspector's attention for investigation and the correct level of recognition given.

The difficult job well done, or for example, the first service of a young newly qualified helmsman in charge which wasn't pure bread and butter could be acknowledged in a written pat on the back in the form of a letter of appreciation by the Operations Director, or Chief Executive.

However, there are occasions when major recognition is required.



Don't have any illusions about the sea. As the photograph shows it is a cruel, hostile environment, which will, and can kill anyone. It has no respect for age, sex, rank or creed.

We do everything we can in the training given and equipment provided to ensure that our people are as safe as they can be out there, but they do put themselves at risk to save others.

It is true, they are not rowing open lifeboats into the teeth of a gale, but even today when alongside a casualty you can still be swept over the side, or crushed, and a lifeguard swimming in a hostile sea only has his, or her endurance and strength to save the rescuee and themselves.



The Awards

Our 4 major awards are: from the top, the Gold, Silver and Bronze Medals and finally the Thanks of the Institution inscribed on Vellum. These 4 awards are in the gift of our Trustees and are formally voted upon at a Trustee meeting.

Our criteria for the award of the Gold Medal is that the recipient must have displayed outstanding courage, skill and initiative in the saving of life. It may also be recommended if a life has not been saved if altogether exceptional courage has been shown.

A Silver Medal is awarded for an act of outstanding merit, which falls just short of the standard required for a Gold Medal, and Bronze Medal will be recommended for an act of conspicuous gallantry, which falls just short of the standard required for the award of a Silver Medal. A crew member on a lifeboat where the Coxswain is awarded a Gold Medal will receive a Bronze Medal automatically, unless he qualifies for a Silver Medal in his own right.

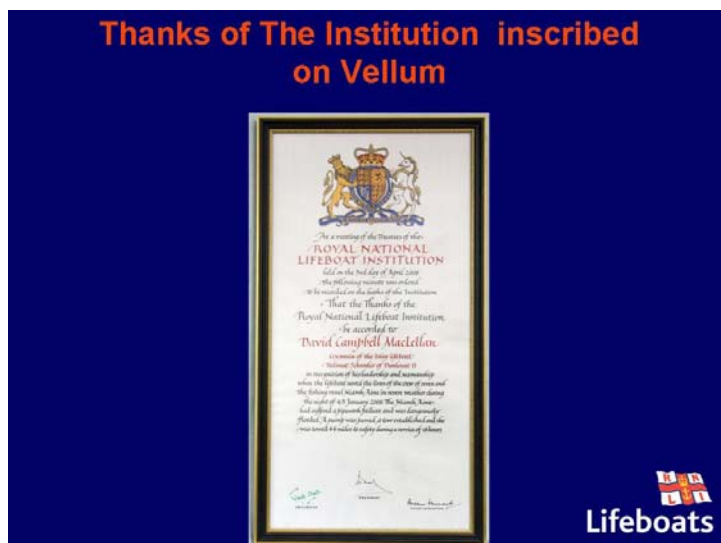
The Thanks on Vellum is accorded for a meritorious act, which falls just short of the Bronze Medal standard.

After his formal investigation the Inspector will submit a report and recommendation and if this is supported it will be formally submitted to the Trustees by the Chief Executive. To assist the Inspector, and the staff considering the recommendation, we have a scoring matrix, covering 10 common factors in every incident, such as weather conditions, professional or boat handling skills, known risk to own life etc etc which is used in the process.

The matrix, and its scores are a confidential part of the HQ staffing process and another part of this process is to compare a similar award from the past. The matrix, the staff comments and deliberations are not divulged to anyone, all the Trustees see is a formal report of the incident.



Our medal bears the head of our founder Sir William Hillary, and is the same design, whatever its denomination.



This is the Thanks on Vellum

Review of 2008

The word hero can be debased and used in the wrong context, often by the media, but anyone receiving a major award from the RNLI can be considered to be a hero.

To go back to the 17829 incidents which the RNLI dealt with last year. The Torbay lifeboat service to the freighter Ice Prince on 13 January saw Coxswain Mark Criddle receive the Silver Medal for Gallantry, and his six crew members each got a Thanks on Vellum. The Captain and crew of the Coastguard helicopter, which also took part in this dangerous rescue, were also accorded a collective Thanks on Vellum for their major contribution.

Coxswain David Campbell MacLellan of Islay lifeboat station was accorded the Thanks on Vellum for saving a fishing vessel and her crew in an 18 hour service conducted in severe weather conditions on 4 January, and

Coxswain David John of St Davids lifeboat station was accorded the Thanks on Vellum for saving a disabled fishing vessel and its crew during a 14 hour service, which was also conducted in severe weather conditions on 6 March. Some of the lifeboat crew were injured during this service. Although we have cameras fitted on some of our lifeboats, circumstances will dictate that the crews have other priorities during a service.

And finally Lifeguards Chris Boundy and John Dugard received the Silver Medal for saving the life of a man, innocently fishing on rock at Trebarwith Strand in Cornwall who slipped into the sea on 28 June.



The man fell into a notoriously dangerous pool, known locally as the washing machine, and Chris in particular was very nearly drowned himself as they saved the unconscious man.

Conclusion

So there you have it – 3 Silver medals and 9 Thanks on Vellums in 12 months – the RNLI doesn't use the word hero lightly, but ensures that true courage is properly recognised.