

# BICENTENARY BOOKLET DOCUMENTS COAST GUARD OPERATIONS

A bicentenary booklet that traces the Irish Coast Guard's history from its establishment in January 1822 by a British act of parliament has been compiled by retired marine radio officer Joe Ryan. Lorna Siggins gives a glimpse of some special operations and what the Coast Guard has done in Ireland over 200 years, from his commemorative document.

The Irish Coast Guard's role in combating smuggling, providing famine relief and gruelling night work at sea, which was "enough to kill a horse", are recorded in 'Coast Guard saving lives in Ireland for 200 years' – a booklet marking the organisation's bicentenary by Joe Ryan, who worked as an Irish Coast Guard officer from 1995 until his retirement in 2014.

He records how its first inspector general, James D'Ombrain, was of Huguenot stock and began construction of station houses in Co. Cork. By 1900, there were about 200 stations around the Irish coast, primarily to prevent smuggling but with a secondary lifesaving role.

The many former British navy ratings employed used their gigs and galleys to save lives prior to the establishment of RNLI stations – and often volunteered to crew RNLI lifeboats, he writes. From 1831, when D'Ombrain undertook an annual sail around Ireland, he witnessed the effects of famine on the west coast and was instrumental in organising relief.

**MAJOR EVENTS DURING 19th CENTURY**  
This led to clashes with his higher authority which adopted a harsh unforgiving attitude reflected in Seamus Heaney's work, 'For the Commander of the Eliza'. Sir Randolph Routh had complained to Sir Charles Trevelyan about D'Ombrain during the 1839 famine and this was the basis of Heaney's poem, Ryan writes.

Ryan quotes from D'Ombrain's correspondence with the British government on the issue: "I cannot but feel deeply mortified and grieved at the censure their Lordships have passed on me for an act which I considered at the time to be one of pressing emergency." After his retirement, D'Ombrain became a Commissioner of the Lighthouse Authority of Ireland – at that time the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin.



Ryan writes of the loss of the first White Star liner 'Tayleur', which was wrecked off Dublin's Lambay Island on 21 January 1854, with about 200 of the 670 passengers and crew on board surviving. He also outlines the call-up of Coast Guard ratings in Ireland to serve with Britain in the Crimean War from 1854, and the transfer of Coast Guard control to the British Admiralty in 1856, where duties ranged from assisting vessels in distress, undertaking navigational duties, recording reports from fishing harbours and identifying wild birds and rare fish washed ashore.

"The Admiralty had an ulterior motive in taking over the Coast Guard. They had a reserve of trained men to call upon in times of war. We can also see how things like their benevolence and lifesaving skills no longer priorities were," Ryan notes.

#### COAST AND RESCUE SERVICES

The death of Captain John McNeill Boyd and five of his crew from the guard ship 'Ajax' during an attempted rescue of two ships seeking shelter in Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) during storms in February 1861 is also featured in the booklet.

Ryan also covers the Fethard lifeboat disaster of February 1914; the establishment of the Coast Life Saving Service after independence in 1922; the initiation of a separate Coast Watch service during World War II; and the last use of a breeches buoy.

He pays tribute to Joan O'Doherty (nee McGinley) from the West Coast Search and Rescue Action Committee of 1988, which highlighted the need for more helicopter rescue bases, and the role of Captain Liam Kirwan, the first director of the new Irish Marine Emergency Service from 1993.

Kirwan had worked with Captain Peter Brown and Captain David Shiels on the Coast and Cliff Rescue Service from 1987, and Ryan also recalls the contribution of the late Agnes Walsh who worked for the Department of the Marine during implementation of the Government's Doherty report on search and rescue.

#### DEATHS OF CREW AND VOLUNTEERS

Incidents such as the loss of all six crew without trace from the Donegal fishing vessel Carrickatine in November 1995; the death of volunteer diver Michael Heffernan during the Belderrig cave rescue in north Mayo in October 1997;



#### THE IRISH COAST GUARD NETWORK

The Irish Coast Guard is Ireland's fourth blue light service (along with An Garda Síochána, the Ambulance Service and the Fire Service). It provides a nationwide maritime emergency organisation as well as a variety of services to shipping and other government agencies.

#### Each year, the Irish Coast Guard is expected to:

- Handle 3,000 marine emergencies.
- Assist 4,500 people and save about 200 lives.
- Task Coast Guard helicopters on missions around 2,000 times (40 times to assist mountain rescues and 200 times to carry out aeromedical HEMS missions on behalf of the HSE), Coast Guard volunteer units will respond 1,000 times and RNLI and community lifeboats will be tasked by the Co-ordination Centres about 950 times.
- Evacuate medical patients off our Islands to hospital on 100 occasions.
- Assist other nations' Coast Guards about 200 times.
- Make around 6,000 maritime safety broadcasts to shipping, fishing and leisure craft users.
- Carry out a 'safety on the water' campaign that targets primary schools and leisure craft users, including at sea and beach patrols.
- Investigate approximately 50 maritime pollution reports.

With five medium-lift Sikorsky S-92 Search and Rescue helicopters under the Coast Guard's wing, these are deployed at bases in Shannon (Rescue 115), Dublin (Rescue 116), Waterford (Rescue 117) and Sligo (Rescue 118).

Each station has one Sikorsky S-92, with an additional aircraft on stand-by, which rotates as a back-up between each of the four regional locations. The main roles are to rescue people from danger at sea or on land, to organise immediate medical transport and to assist boats and ships within the country's jurisdiction.

With close to approximately 200 flying hours per month for all four bases, this includes both training and operational flights. The service is 24/7 365 with a contractually required 98% availability at 15 minutes readiness from 7.30am to 9pm, and 45-minutes readiness from 9pm to 7.30am. (Source: Department of Transport)

the deaths of four Air Corps crew when Rescue 111 crashed off Waterford in July 1999 are recalled.

There are also accounts of the extraordinary rescue of a young Spanish crewman wearing no lifejacket from the Skerd Rocks in outer Galway Bay by Rescue 115 from Shannon in 2000; and the rescue of 21 sailors from the Fastnet Yacht Race competitor Rambler in August 2011.

Ryan also records the devastating impact of the death of the first Irish Coast Guard volunteer on duty – Caitriona Lucas of Doolin Coast Guard in September

2016 – and the loss of the Rescue 116 helicopter crew of Captains Dara Fitzpatrick and Mark Duffy, and winch team Paul Ormsby and Ciarán Smith off Blackrock island, North Mayo on 14 March 2017.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Joe Ryan spent 12 years at sea on all types of ships working initially for Marconi Marine, before going freelance and spending the final six years directly employed by a super tanker company.

He worked as a computer engineer with McDonnell Douglas Information Systems Ltd in Dublin and joined the Irish Marine Emergency Service in 1995 – renamed the Irish Coast Guard in 2000. He retired in 2014, and his booklet is based on research undertaken for a lecture for the Maritime Museum in Dun Laoghaire that same year. Copies of his booklet are available by emailing Joe Ryan at [ryan.jjj@gmail.com](mailto:ryan.jjj@gmail.com)

\*This article by Lorna Siggins was first published on Afloat.ie – Ireland's sailing, boating and maritime online magazine (14 January 2022). Lorna Siggins is a print and radio report, and a former 'Irish Times' western correspondent. She is the author of 'Evert Calling' (1994) on the first Irish Evert expedition; 'Mayday! Mayday!' (2004) on Irish helicopter search and rescues, and 'Once Upon a Time in the West: the Corrib Gas Controversy' (2010).