The best tribute to the brave boys who went out that night is that the Penlee lifeboat is still dedicated to life-saving at sea

MIKE SAGAR-FENTON looks at how, despite the devastation to the community of the loss of the Penlee lifeboat 25 years ago, the precious work of saving lives at sea continued - and still continues

NO-ONE who lived in West Cornwall then will ever forget December 20,

It was a Sunday, and as people turned on their radios or heard from their family and friends that the Penlee lifeboat had been lost with all hands a cold numbness spread through the whole community.

It seemed almost against nature. No Cornish lifeboat had been lost for over 40 years and we were perhaps complacent with the usual pattern that the lifeboats went out, rescued people, and came home again.

Suddenly the last piece of the jigsaw was missing, leaving a shocking gap which still inspires a feeling of emptiness even 25 years later.

Those closest to the tragedy really were in shock. The families, formerly ordinary anonymous Mousehole people, were given no time to begin to come to terms with their loss before they became the target of mass national and international media.

Some were respectful but many were brutally intrusive, leaving a bitter taste. Their dignified response to this, and later to the controversies over the relief fund, was a tribute to the families' strength and sanity in the face of a world turned upside down.

Those left from the lifeboat's operational crew were equally shattered. The lost crew were members of their close-knit team, family, friends often from schooldays, drinking companions, part of the very fabric of the village, suddenly gone along with their boat.

Their response has gone down in history, though it is typical of the spirit of lifeboat men and women

everywhere. The very next day, as the helicopters were quartering the seas outside the harbour wall looking for bodies and wreckage, a new team were volunteering and demanding a replacement lifeboat as a matter of urgency. What if there was a vessel in trouble and there was no lifeboat available to help?

As the press ballyhoo went on, a new crew quietly got on with the job of retraining. Usually a crew grows organically, the older ones teaching the younger, but this time the cream of the station had gone overnight.

An RNLI team came to Penlee to train the replacement crew, and within a couple of months the station was funds. completely operational once more.

It was a huge achievement, and proved for ever that a lifeboat station is neither a building, a boat, or even a crew. It is an idea, and as long as that idea is shared there will always be a

Penlee lifeboat. And so there is. In 1983 the station made a hard parting with Penlee Point in order to accommodate the revolutionary Arun Class Mabel Alice in Newlyn. She was designed to lie afloat rather than splash down a slipway, and so took moorings in Newlyn harbour, where she remained for the whole 20 years of her service. Her first coxswain was Kenny Thomas, and he was followed in 1992 by Neil Brockman, whose father Nigel had been lost aboard the Solomon Browne.

Neil was one of the youngest coxswains in the RNLI, and he is now one of the most experienced. He was even chosen to go to China to train the growing Chinese lifeboat service on the Arun lifeboats they have acquired

from the RNLI. The 25th anniversary finds the lifeboat station in excellent heart. In 2001 It was decided to add a fast-response inshore lifeboat to Penlee's complement, and an inflatable Atlantic 75 Paul Alexander now deals with the many smaller emergencies which naturally arise on a crowded holiday coast - swimmers in trouble, inflatable dinghies blowing out to sea, wind-surfers, jet skis, dinghies and yachts in difficulties, even small fishing boats which might need a tow.



In 2003 she was joined by the stateof-the-art Severn Class Ivan Ellen, designed to proceed at speed in all weathers to whatever mishap may require her services.

Despite the increasing work-load, only two members of the Penlee station are full-time employees of the RNLI. All the rest are volunteers, taking time out of their lives not only for the service missions but also for the rigorous training now required, exercises, demonstrations routine work.

They are supported by a network of shore-based volunteers, some acting as officers and some performing astonishing feats of fund-raising.

Despite having no prominent retail outlet unlike some other stations, Penlee still manages to raise around £50,000 every year towards RNLI

Anniversaries of the tragedy are still difficult times, especially for the families who experience another wave of attention.

The sadness of the event which touched and inspired the whole nation can never fade, and its memory will always be

However the best possible tribute to the brave boys who went out that night is the fact that the station they served still exists, busier and more successful every year, still dedicated as they were to the work of lifesaving at sea.

The story of Penlee

goes on. For those wishing to know more about the Penlee lifeboat disaster, the BBC documentary The Cruel Sea is to be repeated on December 19 at 7pm on BBC2. Penlee - The Loss of a Lifeboat and Penlee Lifeboat - the first 200 years by Michael Sagar-Fenton are available from bookshops.

■ The memorial to the crew of the Solomon Browne in Paul Church, Closp

Curnow is a self-taught artist who took up painting seven years ago. Below Boscawen is one of a series of acrylic paintings that Ralph Curnow has completed around the subject of the Penlee lifeboat disaster of 1981. "One of the reasons that I've produced these paintings is that some of the younger generation are not aware of the historic relevance of the event. Hopefully these paintings will help to keep the memories alive because what the crewmen did that night was tremendous. It is difficult to get a visual of what the scene that night was like so I've had to take a lot of artistic licence to get light into the scene. The painting shows the Solomon Browne making the first of its runs to try to get a line on to the Union Star. I've tried to get it as accurate as I can otherwise the painting is meaningless."

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story

Penlee

goes

On

Bravery of a lifeboat crew that touched the nation



Stephen Magran



■ Nigel Brockman.



STREET,

aptin Elewett

IN ALL the 200-year-old annals of the lifeboat service perhaps the most remembered name is that of

Remembered not just because what happened on that she was lost with all her eight fateful night 25 years crew on that terrible December night 25 years ago, but for the way inest traditions of the lifeboat service in the most extreme of The waves grew even larger as

December 19, 1981, began as any Solomon Browne was now taking normal, calm day in west Corn- on some of the worst conditions wall. Up until three in the af- ever witnessed in Mount's Bay termoon nothing indicated it was She took nearly half an bour to going to be anything other than a get to the *Union Star*, guided per-typical grey pre-Christmas day haps by lights from the returned haps by lights from the returned Sea King piloted by Russ Smith; gain strength with uncommon with him was leading aircrew. speed. Within just two hours Martin Kennie, and winchman. Mount's Bay was in the grip of Steve Marlow. merricane force winds the like of Wisely coxswain Richards took thich few had seen.

An hour later at spm a call came the coaster and one eye witness in to Falmouth coastguard from saw the lifeboat's bow twice touch the 1,400-ton coaster. Union Star, her port stern. It was a miracle of bound from Holland on her maid- seamanship that this manoeuvre en voyage to Arklow with a cargo was even achieved. Huge waves of fertiliser. She was a few miles broke across the coaster's middle. south of Tater Dhu lighthouse. Then her sea anchor broke. Unhad lost power and would aban- stable before, she was more so don ship if the engines would not now, twisting and turning at the

Our in Mount's Bay the salvage moving ever closer to Boscowen tug Moorde Holland was made cliffs barely 200 yards distant. aware of the satuation. Trevelyan Having no luck getting people off Richards was rung at home and in the lee, Trevelyan Richards told of the situation.

quickly brought the lifeboat back Out in Mount's Bay a storm- around the coaster and into the tossed poweriess Union Star had weather her sea anchor out and 32-year-old He may have done this to give Captain Mike Moreton was, via himself more sea room and to the coastruard, trying to contact allow the lifeboat to be pinned. The wreck of the Union Star upturned on the rocks. the shipping company for author- against the side of the coaster by bannes Buurman to that end but worked. no decision was ever made. Even The lifeboat reported four from the lifeboat made everyone the disaster. tually Captain Moreton did agree people taken off and that she was fear the worse.

At 7.52pm, in horrendous 60 from the cliffs. The wind howled with grief. The rescue operation turned in for the sake of the children. First going to the aid of those in need of in for a deal of criticism for his from Caldrose reached the Union zontally. All around them the sea to a search for the bodies of the priority was the recovery of bod- their help. Sacr to try and left off passengers. heaved and boiled white. Time eight men of the Solomon Browne les and wreckage, a search that The service at Truro closed the potential rescuers that night. The belicopter descended only for was fast running out. Looking and the eight aboard the Union went on right over the Christmas nation's grieving and the story. What came out in the evidence Barrie Torrie. the ship to rear up and its mast down on the scene from his Sea Star. nearly his the rotors in seas hig- King pilot Russ Smith saw the Much wreckage was found Helicopters from Culdrose and tical turn as the focus switched to perience of sea conditions was that the Union Star was probably the causes of the tragedy that the Union Star was probably the coaster and off again. Then Penzance, most of it from the life. Charles H Barrett, took part in At St John's Hall in March, doomed the moment her engines copies rescue. The only hope now radio contact with the Solomon boat. Splintered fragments that this painstaking process. Four Coroner Derrick Pepperell failed. with the lifebout. At 8.12pm Browne was suddenly lost at told of her sudden, violent de- bodies from the lifebout and two opened the inquest into the 16. Such were the extreme weather the faneful decision was taken to 9.22pm. my to rescue those on the stricken. No one witnessed the exact mo. The sea, calm, benign and the sea gave up. Solomon ment the lifeboar disappeared. sparkling, no longer the monster. On Friday, January 22, 1982, the delivered on 15 of the 16 victims. a tow line could have been se-Express Warned to be on standby Captain Buurman from the of that terrible night, helped to Duke and Duchess of Kent, along Captain Moreton was the only cured to the coaster even had

bridge of his tug was the last make the mind doubt. Helicopters with Rear Admiral Graham, dir-fatality recorded by the inquest as Captain Moreton accepted the ofthe Penice boat person to see it. He saw the So- quartering the sea off Penzance ector of the lifeboat service, at- being due to misadventure, an fer. Helicopter rescue had proved Iomon Brown atop one of the promenade Vessels going out in tended a memorial service at Paul indication that the jury thought impossible. The same witness Consequent Travelyan Richards huge waves and then it disaps search. Wreckage hauled from Church with its RNLI flag at half he bore some responsibility for said he considered rescuing imposed only one man per family peared into a trough. She may the sea, as well as bodies. All mast and a lifebelt from the So- his own fate. Attention then began to focus ditions to be extremely danger-At a private meeting in the on the Board of Trade inquiry in ous. seased the retaining shackle. lights from both vessels went out before.

A Penlee disaster fund was posthumously awarded the ser- the tragedy and to make recom- of rescue. Falmouth coastguard called to quickly set up to help the families vice's highest award, the Gold mendations to prevent a recur- In the Western Approaches that the slipway and into the black the lifebout over the air waves, that had suffered loss. Twelve Medal, with Bronze Medals going rence. manistrom beyond defining the but there was only stience. Fif- children had lost their fathers, to all the crew. Tributes to the eight lifeboat which is on almost permanent onshore are the rise almost on Union Star ran aground. Onlook across the country Almost every men came the length and breadth had been called out too late. But as a standby at anchor in Mount's Bay.



recounts the story of

she left the shelter of land. The

his craft into the lee created by

mercy of the monster seas, and



isation to take a tow. He was also wind and sea so that people could cliffs were completely helpless. At to some extent the nation's spon- culminated in a nationwide trib- Union Star as to what he wanted m contact with the skipper Jo- jump from the stricken vessel. It first no-one was sure what had taneous outpouring of generosity ute to the men on Monday, Feb- to do. occurred. The prolonged silence obscured the ongoing grief from ruary 15 at Truro Cathedral. The inquiry closed on Wednes-

Mousehole was a village trau- them Prime Minister Margaret published on May 18. to an airlift of people off the coast- going back for more. The two Dawn brought a beautiful, matised by its loss, Its famous Thatcher, Bishop Mumford gave The inquiry found no-one was ships were now barely 50 yards warm, sunny day - but it was cold lights were switched off except for the service and spoke of the men's to blame, although many had exthe three main days of Christmas, bravery and their selfless act of pected Captain Moreton to come

from then on took a more prac- from experts with years of ex-

from the Union Star were all that deaths.

and a series of huge ers above in the driving rain and retail outlet had a bucket or other of Britain. Their bravery touched one coastguard put it, he was at ready to go to the rescue of any spume coming over the 60 ft high receptacle to receive money, and the nation in a way rarely seen. It the command of the skipper of the large vessel.

Before 1,300 people, among day, April 27. Its findings were

delay in asking for help from the

conditions that it was the opinion Accidental death verdicts were of one expert that he did not think people by lifeboat in such con-

vicarage the Duke and Duchess the ballroom of the Queen's Hotel One good thing did emerge is the infebouthouse for the right coaster or rocks. Perhaps the It was just days before Christ- gave each of the bereaved families which began on March 14, 1983. from all the tragedy British coastmoment to launch so switch was coaster capsized on top of the mas 1981 and affected the nation a silver cross marked with the Chaired by wreck commission- guards are now empowered to them lifeboat Whatever happened was like no maritime disaster since initials of their loved one. A few er Richard Stone QC, the enquiry over rule a captain if they con-Laure the Filter Penrose re sadden and cataclysmic. The the sinking of the Titanic 70 years days later the RNLI announced . ran for 29 days. Its main purpose sider he is endangering his ship that Trevelyan Richards had been was to get at the cause, if any, of and crew by not taking up an offer

> power is backed up by the coast-Much of the inquiry centred on guard tug, Anglian Princess,



Charles Greenhaugh.



Kevin Smith.





Gary Wallis.

Poignancy for a village as it remembers its heroes

THE familiar carols will again be sung at Mousehole this Christmas. The harbour lights will shine across the waters with the message of hope and of Christ's birth in a Bethlehem

This year there will be an added poignancy to the village occasion for it is the 25th anniversary of the heroism of eight brave local men remembered world-wide for their final act of valour.

The Penlee lifeboat Solomon Browne was broken in hurricane conditions during darkness on December 19, 1981. The crew, led by coxswain Trevelyan Richards, 56, tried, once again, to take off those on the stricken coaster Union Star. In all 16 lives were lost.

Many fond and tragic memor-ies will be rekindled in the coming days. There will be increased media and public interest because of the landmark

constantly with their great loss. Neil Brockman, coxswain. day by day since December 1981. And lifeboatmen will be on duty at Penlee, in Cornwall and throughout Britain again this recalls the horrific Christmas, as always. Their vigilance and service night and the grief of

continues - and the heroes of a community that Penlee will never be forgotten. The RNLI Gold Medal for outstanding gallantry was awar-Coxswain-Mechanic Stephen Dolphin off Mousehole. Mechanic John Blewitt; Crew was awarded the RNLI Bronze and records.

Gary Wallis. were the captain, his wife, her nights before Christmas.

cluding those from the Queen of seamanship."

The Duchess of Kent later-vis- night like this". He returned and inspire the heart. one occasion, to meet the wid- his mother Jacqueline and story: "Throughout the entire lights will be switched on by ows. There were memorial ser- brothers Kevin and Martin. rescue evolution the Penlee Roy and Margaret Pascoe, with vices - including one at Truro Like so many, I was awake crewnever appeared to hesitate. the traditional carol singing. Cathedral. The appeal fund fi- through that tragic night, wait- After each time they were Roy is a former treasurer of the

'home' of the Solomon Browne on Sunday December 20. immediately commenced an- ana Burroughs and treasurer at the Penlee station, at Paul All was hushed as relations, other run-in. Methodist Chapel are treas- the bereaved.

Today Neil Brockman, 42, covered the scene and as a constant pounding they were Mrs Burroughs said work on whose father Nigel died in the journalist as well as a friend of taking.

He had this message for the funerals at Paul and Lelant tion shown by the Penlee men; it On December 16 only there "I appreciate all the support bodies were recovered.

very proud to serve here in West coffins were borne on the bashed on top of the casualty's return for adults, £1.60 for chil-Cornwall and proud of the sup-shoulders of colleagues and hatch covers." port we receive. "Penlee continues to grow We sang Sunset and Evening Star ous verdicts of accidental death The Newlyn harbour lights have had two new boats and are and the Fishermen's Psalm The on 15 victims of the disaster switch-on will be the previous

still going on as strong as ever. Lord is my Pilot was read. with a verdict of misadventure night, tomorrow, Friday We have had our busiest year in Many of the mourners broke on the Master of the 1,400-ton December 15. 2006 with 47 'shouts', 23 for our down and wept openly . . . grief Union Star, Captain Henry Mi- The families of the Solomon Severn class Ivan Ellen which was perhaps most polgnant chael Moreton. came in March 2003 and the among those who may never be Through the years I have ale events for this 25th anniversary others for the inshore vessel." granted the mercy of seeing ways been reluctant to write of - but will remember in their

year have been for tows of yes. The church at Paul was dec. have passed. Knowing so many as they have always done.

DOUGLAS WILLIAMS

swain describes as "routine" and a crib. come for Coxswain and crew for in this Nativity setting: They and personal sense of loss.

Yet the families have lived . Current Penlee lifeboatmen, from left to right: Patch Harvey, mechanic, David Pascoe, second coxswain. gave their lives in order to save But, as a journalist, I was their fellows, even when they there to report as accurately were strangers. We thank God and sympathetically as possible for the courage and kindness the tragedy day by day, the emowhich cause men to risk all for tional funeral services, learn of the tremendous global reaction This was what is meant to and then see the new boat Mobel

love one's fellow man. It was nearly three months the noble tradition. ded to the Coxswain and the bringing a sick man safely to later that I reported, in full, the I was among the happy crowd RNLI Bronze Medal was awar- shore from a French trawler whole of the two days' inquest at on Mousehole harbour from ded to each of the crew; Second and taking off the crew of the Guildhall, Penzance. The shortly before the disaster sentences I penned then have when crewman Charles Green-Madron; Assistant Mechanic Neil was only 28 when he echoed around the world in haugh landiord of the Ship Inn.

members Charles Greenhaugh. Medal for his work in rescuing For the feelings of all were on December 19, these have Kevin Smith, Barrie Torrie and the Newlyn crabber Julian captured in the epitaph to the been dimmed from 8pm to 9pm. Mousehole men in the words of so that only the Cross and the These were presented to the Neil was 17 at the time of the American pilot of the Sea Angels shine out.

the coaster who also perished that tremendous storm six boat and coaster that night. nual family service at Paul two daughters and four crew "It was a hell of a night. It was clared: "They were truly the December 17, when their names horrendous, the worst weather I bravest eight men I have ever will be read and prayers said. A That Christmas there were so have ever seen. To get four off seen who were also totally ded-memorial candle will be lit.

standards of the RNLI".

Kent, president of the RNLL from each family is enough on a graphic lines continue to thrill night. ited Mousehole, on more than home and waited for news with He added and I said in the December 16, the Mousehole

was amazing considering the gramme will feature the village An emotional cloak of grief horrific hurricane seas and the the following day.

died and in the present crew. The grief poured over at the ultimate courage and dedica- September.

friends, as the Mousehole choir The jury returned unanim- two adults and two children.

Alice take her place to continue

Nigel Brockman; Emergency became coxswain and in 1996 many books, newspaper reports switched on the brilliant fairytale lights. Ever since then,

families by Princess Alice, tragedy knew the men so well. King belicopter from RNAS. The 'Heroes of Penlee' will Duchess of Gloucester Those on and has vivid recollections of Culdrose who flew over the life also be remembered at the an-Lt Cdr Russell L Smith de Church on Sunday morning.

many messages of sympathy, in- the coaster was a brilliant feat licated to upholding the highest. No doubt, as in previous years, there will be flowers in and Prince Philip. Prince He was at the lifeboat station The Cornishman used these memory at the Penlee station at Charles, Prince Minister Mar- responding to the call on that words from my report as its Mousehole, from which the garet Thatcher and the Duke of fateful night but was told "one front page headline - and the crew left on that dreadful

nally raised over £33 million. ing as the early reports became washed, blown or bumped away lights committee; the chairman Local memorials at the a reality and was in Mousehole from the casualty, the Penlee is Dudley Penrose, secretary Di-

Parish Church and Mousehole neighbours and friends, visited "Their spirit and dedication The BBC Country File pro-

the repair of the lights had betragedy, is coxswain of the Pen- many and a relation of one of "The greatest act of courage" gun when they were taken down lee lifeboat and has immense the crew, I could feel the heart- that I have ever seen and am in the New Year and the inpride in the lifeboatmen who rending silence and numbness. likely to ever see, was the pen-stallation had continued since

churches of the four men whose manoeuvred back alongside the will be a 'Park and Ride' scheme casualty in over 60ft breakers from Penzance station to through the years from the pub- No-one who was there will and rescued four people shortly. Mousehole along the promenlic and the local press. We are ever forget the scenes when the after the Penlee had been ade. The charge will be \$2.50

Browne crew will have no extra Most of the rescue calls this their menfolk laid to rest. the disaster as anniversaries own personal and private way.

sels and a lot of what the cox- orated with its Christmas tree of the crew and their families Like the arms of Mousehole and coming myself from a close piers, they have always been work. Recent letters of Com- The Vicar, the Rev Hugh Cad- knit fishing family and com- enfolded in the love, protection mendation from the RNLI have man, summed it up so perfectly munity, there has been a deep and affection of the local