

Coxswain Ian Johns

Newhaven Lifeboat Station

On behalf of the Council of the RNLI, I write to congratulate you on your seamanship and leadership during a service on 1 August 2006, which resulted in two lives being saved.

The Newhaven Severn class lifeboat ON 1243, RNLB *David and Elizabeth Acland*, was launched under your command at 1932, following a report that two people had been swept out to sea. The weather was overcast; visibility good, the wind was westerly force 6-7 and the sea state was rough in conditions of wind over tidal stream. High water was at 1612 and it was approaching neaps. The service occurred at mid ebb when the tidal stream runs strongly in the vicinity of Newhaven. You proceeded at full speed out of Newhaven Harbour, turned west once clear of the breakwater and followed the line of the western breakwater remaining some two cables off. Effective lookout was hampered by the sea breaking over the bow.

With some assistance from those on shore and when approximately mid way along the breakwater, your crew sighted a female struggling in the water and caught in a rip approximately 50 metres off the breakwater and within 100 metres of the shoreline. The conditions were too rough to launch the Y boat and time was short. So you approached the casualty turning to put the sea on the port bow and your crew recovered her on the starboard side using the scramble net. One crew man entered the water whilst a second remained on the net partially submerged in order to assist the lady, whose weight made recovery difficult; she was conscious but tired and in shock.

With the first casualty onboard, attention turned to finding the second. Again with assistance from those on shore, the man was quickly located, struggling to stay afloat close to the landward end of the western breakwater in heavy surf and a deep swell; moreover, he was experiencing both an undertow and backwash and was unable to swim to the shore and thus faced the real possibility of being swept onto the breakwater. Despite attempts with heaving lines, those ashore were unable to assist.

Clearly you had to act quickly to recover the casualty whilst he was still in an area accessible to the lifeboat. You made your approach bow first with minimal under keel clearance to within what was estimated to be two boat lengths of the shore and the breakwater. When within 10 metres of the casualty, you ordered the crew to throw heaving lines because you were concerned for the safety of the lifeboat in an area where you knew the seabed to be strewn with rocks and debris. The casualty caught one of the heaving lines and you managed to maintain position long enough for the crew to pull him towards the lifeboat and recover him using the scramble net and two crew as before. The lifeboat was very close to a lee shore with her stern into the weather. Once the man was onboard, you went astern into safer water and returned to station at 1950 where both casualties were assessed and handed over to a waiting ambulance.

I congratulate you on the success of this service in most hazardous conditions, resulting in two lives being saved. Your judgement and boat handling skills, backed up by local knowledge, were of the highest order in this short, but very effective, service.

Well done!

Admiral Sir Jock Slater

Chairman

December 2006