

# Silver medal service to the *Savinesti*

## 15 February 1979

On Thursday morning February 15 a Romanian cargo ship, *Savinesti*, with 28 people on board was reported in distress 125° 37.5 miles from Spurn Point; she had engine failure and was dragging her anchor. After liaison (made more difficult because heavy snow had brought down telephone wires) between Yarmouth Coastguard, the divisional inspector of lifeboats (North East) and the stations concerned it was decided that Wells lifeboat should launch to try to cut off the casualty which was in danger of grounding on Race Bank or Docking Shoal. Another distress call had come to the north which Humber lifeboat might have to answer and no other lifeboat in the area could launch.

The morning was heavily overcast with continuous snow blizzards and poor visibility; the wind was north-easterly strong gale force 9 to storm force 10. Maroons were fired at Wells at 1005 and at 1024 the 37ft Oakley lifeboat *Ernest Tom Neathercoat* launched from her carriage into Wells Harbour and set out to sea. It was 2½ hours after high water.

By 1040 the lifeboat had reached the entrance bar and was confronted by heavy rolling seas and the full force of the wind. The lifeboat was being continually hit and filled by the seas and lost her radar, MF radio and echo sounder. Course was set north by east. At 1052 *Savinesti*'s position was given at 331° a mile and a half from South Race Buoy by Wells Coastguard.

By 1100 Coxswain David Cox realised that the lifeboat was labouring to clear the water that she was shipping and had to reduce speed. Although this prevented the labouring, she was still filling and all crew throughout the service had to remain in the after cockpit as the heavy breaking seas made the forward well untenable.

As Bridlington lifeboat had managed to launch to the casualty to the north, the divisional inspector of

lifeboats (North East) was able to release Humber lifeboat to help to the south, and at 1124, after her crew had boarded with great difficulty, the 54ft Arun *City of Bradford IV* slipped her moorings. A course was set to clear the river at 17 knots. Visibility was reduced to less than 75 yards by the blizzard and, with a temperature of -4°C, there was a 3in layer of ice on the boat and rails.

The radar was giving a very poor picture, only just showing Spurn Light Vessel at 1.5 miles, and the Decca Navigator did not appear to be receiving properly. Superintendent Coxswain Brian Bevan eased back and the scanners were checked. They were found to be coated in thick ice which was chipped away before the lifeboat resumed cruising speed.

On clearing the river speed had to be reduced because of tremendous buffeting and nil visibility. The Decca Navigator could only be used if the lifeboat was slowed right down during the infrequent pauses in the heavy snow, when it was hurriedly 'set up' and a reading taken before carrying on.

At 1113 *Savinesti* informed the coastal tanker *Annuity* that she had lost both anchors but had enough power to hold into the weather. At 1124 *Annuity* reported that she was with the casualty and gave her position as 014° 2.6 miles from South Race Buoy. At 1140 the ferry *Norwave* was in the vicinity of the casualty.

At 1213 Coxswain Cox considered that Wells Lifeboat was near South Race Buoy and asked if *Annuity* or *Norwave* could see him on radar, but in that weather, neither could. A minute later the lifeboat sighted a ship and by 1307 was standing by *Savinesti*. At 1314 Coxswain Cox asked if he could be relieved by

Humber Arun lifeboat as soon as possible as his crew were all extremely cold; then, for the next two hours, Wells lifeboat stood by the casualty as she held her own just north of South Race Buoy.

The wind over this period was north-easterly storm to violent storm, force 10 to 11 and there was a very heavy swell with 40ft breaking seas; the banks nearby were making the rollers run for several hundred feet and the continuous heavy snow and blown spray brought visibility at times down to nil. At times all that could be seen of the other vessels by the lifeboat was the tips of their masts. Several attempts were made by *Annuity* and *Norwave* to pass a tow line to the casualty, but it could not be done. Throughout this period the lifeboat VHF transmissions had to be relayed to Yarmouth Coastguard by *Norwave*.

Meanwhile the tug *Lady Moira* was on her way to help and Humber lifeboat was also on her way at ten knots, stopping occasionally to chip ice and fix position.

At 1500 Humber lifeboat was only seven miles away and Wells lifeboat was released to try to make the Norfolk coast in daylight. By now the wind was east north east, violent storm force 11 gusting to hurricane force 1. A course and distance to South East Docking Buoy of 212° ten miles was given to the Wells lifeboat by *Norwave* and with her drogue streamed she started

her return trip. It was soon found that the only course she could sustain without violent movement was south west and she was held down to about half speed. The snow was now blowing directly into the after cockpit and it was one crew member's task to keep the screen and compass glass clear.

Heavy white water was seen ahead at 1700. At first it was thought to be the shore but it proved only to be the banks, so course was held. At 1815 some shore lights, thought to be Brancaster, were glimpsed. A parachute flare was put up and an auxiliary coastguard ashore confirmed the lifeboat's position as being just north of Brancaster Golf Club. An easterly course was then set for Wells harbour. The remaining seven miles took two hours to make good with frequent use of the helm and engines to bring the lifeboat up into the breaking seas.

At 2026 the lifeboat was just west of Wells Bar but no leading lights could be seen through the blizzard. A local fishing boat, *Strandline*, came down channel to act as a leading light and give pilotage help on VHF and, at 2110, with her drogue out to its full extent, the lifeboat entered over the bar, being completely swept again by three seas as she came. As the lifeboat could not be rehoused she berthed in the harbour at 2150. The crew were all helped ashore and most found that they were unable to walk. They were helped into a change of clothes and driven to their homes.

In all, *Ernest Tom Neathercoat*, an open 37ft lifeboat, was at sea for 11 hours 24 minutes in violent storm conditions with very heavy swell and phenomenal seas frequently washing right over her, with continuous

blizzard (Wells was cut off by snow for the following three days), poor visibility and sub zero temperatures.

Back at the scene of the casualty, during the afternoon, four or five rockets were fired across *Savinesti* by *Norwave* in an attempt, which proved unsuccessful, to establish a tow; all lines parted. The tug *Lady Moira* arrived at 1800 but considered conditions too bad to risk men on deck.

By the evening, *Savinesti* was making four knots northwards with the intention of steaming north of Dowsing Light Vessel and then running before the sea into Humber. By 0035 on February 16, the snow had moderated to light showers and the wind to strong gale force 9. When in position 000° Dowsing Light Vessel five miles, the casualty and her escorts turned before the sea on a course for the river. *Savinesti* entered the River Humber at 0303 escorted by *Norwave* and *Lady Moira* and was boarded by a pilot.

Humber Lifeboat returned to station and refuelled, reporting ready for service at 0425.

For this service the silver medal was awarded to Coxswain David J. Cox of Wells lifeboat and the bronze medal to Superintendent Coxswain Brian W. Bevan of Humber lifeboat. Medal service certificates were presented to Second Coxswain Anthony T. Jordan, Motor Mechanic Albert Court, Assistant Mechanic Alan M. Cox and Crew Members Albert Warner, John R. Nudds, Graham B Walker and John W. Betts of Wells lifeboat, and second Coxswain Dennis Bailey, Motor Mechanic Barry 'Bill' Sayers, Assistant Mechanic Ronald Sayers and Crew Members Michael B. Storey, Peter Jordan and Dennis Bailey, Jnr. of Humber lifeboat. Framed letters of thanks signed by Major-General Ralph Farrant, chairman of the Institution, were sent to the master of *Norwave*, Captain Wally Patch, and to the skipper of MFV *Strandline*, John Ward.

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