

YESTERDAY'S NEWS.12
1926
THREE DAYS ADRIFT IN SMALL BOAT.

This is another remarkable story of survival at sea, a story where Tíree came to the rescue. It was widely reported at the time, including in this Lancashire paper:

‘The remainder of the crew of the ill-fated trawler *Cormoran*, which was wrecked off the coast of Islay about a week ago [12 January 1926], arrived in Fleetwood [a Lancashire fishing port] late last night ... Joseph Room, a deck hand, was one of the youngest members of the crew. He resides with his parents at 17, Warwick Place, and when our representative called upon him, he found him seated by the fireside, resting. His legs and feet were badly swollen as a result of his exciting and terrible experiences. Room told his story in a plain and straightforward way:

‘He said: “We had just hauled at Dubh Artach [the lighthouse off the southwestern tip of Islay], the skipper having decided to move homeward and take a further haul or two in the bay before reaching Fleetwood. That was early on Tuesday morning week, and it was extremely dark at the time, and there was a big swell on the sea. We were steering south half east from Dubh Artach. The mate, Palmer, and myself, had been on watch about an hour when he sent me over the bridge to see what was on the log ... Just as I got to the galley, the vessel suddenly struck the rocks, and I ran immediately amidship to call out the bosun and deck hands, and just as I was opening the door they sprang out of bed and came on the deck in their night attire. I went forward to the forecastle to call out the spare hand and a fireman, who were in bed. On going out to the small boat, I heard the skipper, Mr. Buckley, asking for a knife, and he ordered at the same time the lifeboat to be launched. I succeeded in unfastening one of the holders that holds the boat on the deck, when suddenly the vessel took a big lurch and the boat, together with five of the crew, including myself, were all thrown in the raging sea.

“With the exception of one of the firemen, we were all holding onto the ropes of the small boat. The breeze had freshened, and there was a tremendous swell at the time. Despite the bitter cold and repeatedly being submerged by the great waves, I clung on with all my might to the rope of the boat, and I heard one of the crew shouting for the bo’sun, who was at the top of the cover trying to unfasten it. The small boat turned turtle and the bo’sun was cast into the sea, but we all succeeded in regaining the sides and eventually got a portion of the cover off. As the cover was taken off, the swell increased and we succeeded eventually in picking up the firemen.

“The tide swept us away from the side of the vessel, and we then took up another deck hand, who succeeded in keeping above the water. The boat at the time was three parts full of water, and I was sent forward look for the plug, but could not find it. The mate was the only one who had sea boots on. He took them off, and with them we commenced to bale the boat out. We eventually found the plug hole, and placed some of the canvas across it, but it was not strong enough to hold the water back ...

“We [Horace Palmer, mate; Arthur Bantoft, bo’sun; Joseph Room, deck hand; Nathan Jeffreys, deck hand; and Hugh Slavin, fireman] drifted about the whole of Wednesday, continually baling out the water. Just before daybreak, we discovered a flashing light, which we believed to be Dubh Artach Lighthouse. The lighthouse-keeper signalled for us to stop, and directed us the other way, as the tide was running strong, and would have dashed us on to the rocks, where we would have been smashed up. We made many attempts to reach the lighthouse but failed.

“Night fell, and we again decided to lash the coverings down. We were bailing out without stop, and on Thursday morning, after drifting and being at the mercy of the raging sea for 50 hours, picked up the Dutchman’s Cap, and saw in the distance the Isle of Tiree.

“The wind at the time was in our favour, and we rigged up a sail by means of an oar and some canvas cover, and made for the island. About 100 yards away, we met a fisherman in his small boat, who was out on his daily task. It was a great relief, which words can never describe. He had some food aboard, and we ate ravenously, for we had been without food for over 40 hours. He supplied us also with a very welcome cigarette each.

“We reached land, where several fishermen met us, and gave us a real Scotch fisherman’s welcome, and they eventually conducted us [most of those rescued could not walk due to hypothermia, dehydration and a condition known as ‘immersion foot’; they had to be carried ashore] to a farmhouse at Balemartine, on the Isle of Tiree ... The farmer and his family immediately supplied us with food and warm clothing, the latter being generously given by the warm-hearted villagers. We were on the verge of collapse, and medical aid [the island’s GP Dr Stewart] was sent for.

“We were subsequently taken to Scarinish, where we were taken care of by the authorities. On Monday, we were conveyed by the mail boat [the *Cygnets*] to Oban, and placed in the ambulance, and taken to hospital [the mate was kept in for twelve days]. During the whole of the sixty hours in a small boat on the open sea, most of the crew were scantily clad, their clothing consisting of shirts and overalls. We are lucky to be here to tell anything of the experiences we have gone through, and, but for negotiating the isle of Tiree, I feel sure that a few more hours in the open boat would have meant the end of all of us.” (*Lancashire Evening Post*, 22 January 1926, p. 2)

Five other crewmen from the trawler had clambered ashore near Kilchiaran Bay and were looked after on Islay. The skipper, twenty-five-year-old John 'Jack' Buckley, was not so lucky. His body was washed ashore two months later.

Do get in touch if you have any more information on this story.

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