

Remembering one of the most daring rescues of Henry Blogg

When a convoy came to grief off the Norfolk coast 75 years ago it sparked one of the most heroic rescue operations of the Second World War. In the first of two articles, **STEVE SNELLING** charts the tragic story behind a maritime epic.

Henry Blogg was not a man given to exaggeration or facile embellishment. A man whose actions spoke louder than any words, he steered clear of the merest hint of immodesty and positively recoiled at anything smacking of self-congratulation.

And such was the case on a September day in 1941 when Britain's greatest lifeboatman was called to give evidence to an Admiralty Board of Enquiry convened to investigate one of the worst convoy disasters of the Second World War.

In the course of a few hours during a gale-blown night 75 years ago, seven colliers and an escort vessel had been wrecked after blundering off course onto the notorious Haisborough Sands.

A tragedy of unimaginable proportions was averted only by the outstanding bravery of a small band of volunteers - lifeboatmen and matelots - with the 65-year-old Cromer coxswain the most prominent among them.

Of the 119 men saved from the savage, wreck-strewn waters, Blogg had been responsible for saving no fewer than 88 of them.

But barely a month after one of the most extraordinary rescue operations in the 191-year long history of the RNLI, he was reluctant to join in the adulation, even when it came from

fellow seafarers.

"Well, Mr Blogg," observed one of the senior naval officers on the Admiralty panel, "all the reports we have had about your lifeboat have been very complimentary. They all praise the skill and courage with which your boat was handled."

"I should like to tell you that, and I should like to ask you if you would like to say anything yourself about it or your boat's crew?"

Thus far, his answers, polite but curt, had all focused on the professional rather than the personal. But confronted by a direct question, he seemed momentarily taken aback.

"Well," he stumbled, "I do not know what I can say. I do not think there is anything else to say other than what has already been said. I think it would be very difficult to get hold of a better crew."

Even then, he resisted all entreaties to echo the verdict of a succession of survivors who all testified to a struggle against the odds in conditions as bad as anything they had ever experienced.

Yes, the sea had been "very heavy", but, during a lifeboat service spanning nearly 50 years, he had known worse. "I would not call it a specially bad sea," he declared and, by way of explanation, added: "If it had been worse, we could not have got on to the Sands at all."

Honest judgment though it was, it was

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Below, **To the rescue: The Cromer No 1 Lifeboat, the H F Bailey, heading towards the wrecks of the Oxshott and Gallois on the storm-tossed morning of August 6, 1941. A painting by marine artist Mick Bensley.**

an overly modest one. It would have to be left to others to assess the true merit of a rescue mission that many have come to view as a maritime epic.

The harrowing story of Convoy FS 559 began in the first week of August 1941 at Methil in Scotland where a polyglot armada began to gather under the command of Lieut Cdr R J Stephens. A coal convoy bound for Southend, it had grown to 40 merchant ships and escorts by the time it reached Sunderland.

Ahead of them lay a daunting passage through 'home waters' menaced by mines, torpedo boats and enemy aircraft made worse by the natural hazards of bad weather and shallow water.

Forecasts of gale-force winds and unseasonably rough seas all the way down to the Thames Estuary proved all too accurate as the slow-moving colliers plodded southwards in two columns along narrow, buoy-marked, mine-swept channels which were notoriously easy to miss in even the most benign weather.

By the time more escorts joined the convoy on the afternoon of August 5 a rainstorm of "tropical intensity" was falling that continued long into the night.

The storm which followed broke with a fearful ferocity. "By nightfall," wrote Tony Ditcham, a midshipman aboard the destroyer HMS Holderness, "the forecast gale was blowing and by midnight when we were in shallow water off Cromer the seas had become short and steep."

The sky was lit by jagged forks of lightning. At the height of the storm, a barrage balloon was ripped from its cable and burst into flames as it blew across the wild seas. And still the wind grew in intensity. What started as a north-westerly gusting to Force 7 and 8 became a full-blown gale interspersed with blinding squalls.

Steering alongside the starboard column, Holderness yawed violently as she struggled to maintain her course. Others, particularly the smaller vessels, fared even worse.

To Lieut Henry Kirkwood, commanding the corvette HMS Puffin, it was the "worst weather" he had encountered in more than a year's convoy duty in the North Sea.

By the time the storm peaked at around 1am normal station-keeping had gone to pot. In the rain-lashed smother ships lost sight of one another until Convoy FS 559 was scattered across more than six miles of dangerous water off the north-eastern coast of Norfolk.

A bad situation, however, was about to get much worse. Having followed the correct track as far as Buoy 8B, Lieut Cdr Stephens aboard the SS Kentar either inadvertently read off the course from the next buoy or the crew mistakenly steered south-east by east rather than south-east by south.

Either way, the consequences were fatal: Stephens and his charges were led away from the safety of the swept channel and straight for the treacherous slither of sand known as the Middle Haisborough.

By the time Stephens and the escort commander, Lieut Cdr Colin Campbell, realised their mistake and altered course the gap between Kentar and the next vessel was almost two miles.

Beyond ordering one long warning blast on the ship's whistle when altering course, neither Stephens nor Campbell, according to an Admiralty report, "took any steps whatever to warn the ships astern of them".

Being so far ahead, the change of course was "not observed" and the warning went "unheard" with the result that the first any of the ships following

