

How Henry Blogg led fight to

In the second of his articles commemorating one of the most heroic maritime rescues of the Second World War, **STEVE SNELLING** charts the remarkable story of the fight to save the ships' crews of convoy FS 559 who came to grief off the Norfolk coast 75 years ago.

Few men better understood the dangers posed by the Haisborough Sands than Henry Blogg. His daring feats of rescue in those same coastal waters during almost half a century of unparalleled lifeboat service had already earned him near legendary status.

By nature taciturn and strong-willed to the point of obstinacy, he nevertheless combined sound judgment with audacious action. Henry 'Shrimp' Davies, a future Cromer coxswain and one of seven members of the same family who helped crew the H F Bailey 75 years ago, recalled: "He was a very clear-thinking man. He took risks, but they were always calculated risks."

The success of those glorious gambles was reflected in an array of bravery awards that was unmatched in the history of the RNLI: two Gold Medals, three Silver Medals and an Empire Gallantry Medal that was soon to be exchanged for the newly-instituted George Cross, the so-called 'Civilians' VC'.

But not even Henry Blogg, with all his accumulated experience in war and peace, had witnessed anything on the scale of the disaster that threatened to overwhelm the crews of the seven colliers from convoy FS 559 that blundered fatally off course during the early hours of August 6, 1941.

With their ships aground and being battered by a merciless, storm-driven sea, more than 100 men were in danger of being lost. Already some had been swept to their deaths and the naval escorts, for all their gallant efforts, were powerless to save them.

What little hope of salvation that appeared to exist rested with the



volunteer crews from Cromer, Sheringham, Gorleston and Lowestoft which had been mobilised to avert a maritime catastrophe a few miles off the Norfolk coast.

Of all the boats launched to the rescue none was destined to play a greater role than the 46-foot twin screw motor lifeboat H F Bailey.

Setting out from Cromer at 8.15am with a crew of 11, Blogg as senior coxswain had instructed Lewis Harrison to wait another hour till the tide had dropped before following on in the station's Number 2 lifeboat.

At that stage Blogg had little clue as to the full extent of the disaster unfolding on the Haisborough Sands. Informed only that several ships from a southbound convoy had run aground and were in desperate need of assistance, he was under instructions to say nothing to his crew until they were on their way. Hurried on by the north-westerly gale through steep breaking seas, Blogg knew enough to expect something dire, but, in the event, the sight that greeted him late that morning was far worse than his darkest imagining.

"Conditions were very rough, very rough indeed," recalled 'Shrimp' Davies years later. Through the spray and the clearing mist, Blogg counted the wrecks of at least six ships. "We could see the hull of one and the masts of five others," he later reported.

For a few moments he stared in disbelief. It was almost as though he was trying to make sense of the incomprehensible, trying to take in the enormity of the calamity confronting them.

"Nobody had ever seen anything like that before," admitted Davies. "There were so many ships so close together. All of them were within about a mile of one another and they were almost all total wrecks by the time we got there."

It was as if the Middle Haisborough had become one giant ships' graveyard.

Eventually, without extravagant gesture, Blogg set about his perilous task. Steering for the two northernmost wrecks, he skirted round one, which turned out to be the Oxshott, on the grounds that as "she was under water" he could not believe anybody could still be alive aboard her.

It was only as he drew close to the other vessel, the Gallois, that he realised his mistake: the waves and shouts of the French collier's captain selflessly directing him back to their more seriously threatened neighbour.

Even then, they could not see any sign of life aboard the all but submerged wreck. "Suddenly," recalled Davies, "a sea broke over her



and someone spotted the men. They were wrapped round the funnel, all holding on to one another to stop themselves being washed away."

Among the 16 men clinging on for dear life was Chief Officer Robert Pickering. In the six hours since they had run aground, the Oxshott had been smashed to smithereens. "Everything was carried away," reported Pickering. "Lifeboats, rafts, hatches - everything had gone."

All the holds were stove in and her 'back' broken. Then, around daylight, two violent seas smashed the wheelhouse followed by the 'gunner's room' and the 'lamp room'. Five men, including the ship's captain, were swept away and drowned.

Conditions got worse and worse, till there was only the funnel and two masts and the survivors were left hanging on to a single funnel guy rope.

Their grip on life was a slender one, with every sea washing them off and then back on to the exposed deck. "There was just enough time to get your breath back," observed Pickering, "when the next sea came."

Rescuing them, even for a lifeboatman of Blogg's experience, was no easy task. With the decks submerged and so little of the vessel showing above the water, there was nowhere to secure a line.

Blogg's solution was as unorthodox as it was dangerous. "Henry just drove us

straight ahead on to the boat deck," recalled Davies, "and my father, standing in the bows, threw out the grapnel rope and held her there, while the ship's crew ran across what was left of the deck and jumped across to us."

"Considering how bad it was and what they'd been through it was amazing how quick they could move."

Time and again the lifeboat, its bows splintered by hidden obstructions, was pushed off only for Blogg to drive her back, risking self-destruction as he bumped heavily over the deck towards a wedge-shaped crack in the ship's upper works.

An awed Pickering recorded: "I don't know how he got alongside because at that time it was all white water - nothing more or less". What he called "a marvellous piece of work" was quickly followed by the rescue of all 31 men aboard the stranded Gallois, the crew leaping or scrambling down ropes as Blogg expertly laid the H F Bailey alongside.

Having delivered 47 survivors to HMS Puffin - no mean feat in itself - Blogg met up with Lewis Harrison who had just arrived aboard the Harriet Dixon. Putting his own second coxswain aboard to give him the benefit of his experience, Blogg ordered them after the Taara, her disfigurement giving her the appearance of "no more than half a ship", while he

■ Left, The greatest lifeboatman: Henry Blogg was 65 at the time of his service to Convoy FS 559. Coxswain of the Cromer lifeboat for an unparalleled 38 years, his long and distinguished career spanned both world wars.