

Captain David Watt was the Instructional Officer on the *Durham* when she was involved in a dramatic medical emergency mission in the North Atlantic. He has kindly provided the material for the following article.

**DURHAM RESCUE
BY
CAPTAIN D W WATT**

On Tuesday 23rd January 1962, when some 180 nautical miles WSW of the Azores, the Norwegian Motor Vessel *Jotunfjell* had a crank case explosion. As a result, one man was killed and three others were injured. Two of the injured had third degree burns covering 70% of their bodies.

In response to a radio message asking for medical aid the Motor Vessel *Durham*, which was bound for Curacao, altered course to the NNW and steamed about 180 nautical miles to arrive off the stricken vessel shortly after dawn the following day, 24th January. Preparations had been made overnight to receive the three injured men, and the ship's rescue boat had also been thoroughly checked and made ready.



Jotunfjell drifting

The *Durham* took up a position to enable the rescue boat to be lowered to convey the ship's surgeon to the disabled ship. The Instructional Officer, Mr D Watt, was in charge of the rescue boat, which was manned by cadets together

with an Engineer. When the rescue launch arrived alongside the *Jotunfjell* in a six-foot swell, the *Durham's* surgeon boarded the *Jotunfjell* using a Jacob's ladder and, having assessed the condition of the casualties, supervised their transfer to the rescue boat by Neil Robertson stretcher. The size of the swell and the condition of the casualties made this a very tricky operation. It was not possible to accommodate all three casualties in one go, and so two trips were made to convey the injured men to the *Durham*.

It soon became obvious that two of the casualties were beyond the medical resources available on the *Durham*, and so, course was altered for Horta in the Azores. However, after about three hours, the doctor reported the death of one of the casualties, a Norwegian lad of seventeen and a half years of age. The doctor also stated that the condition of the second casualty was now critical and that any further movement within forty-eight hours would prove fatal.

Course was again altered, and the *Durham* headed for Curacao. During the same afternoon, the doctor reported that his supply of plasma was running low, and that the second casualty's condition was now desperate. A radio message was sent out requesting plasma, and, within twenty minutes, an answer came from the Swedish Passenger Liner *Kungsholm* that she had plasma and was steaming southwards towards the *Durham* at 17 knots. The *Durham's* course was again altered, this time to the North, and rendezvous was effected that evening at 1900 hours (24th January). Both vessels lay port side to port side, about four cables apart and in a moderate to strong wind. In this position, the *Durham's* rescue boat, which is on her port side, was launched again, and floodlights from both ships were used to illuminate the water between them. The sea conditions were quite rough, and, to make matters worse, the rescue boat crew were distracted by many of the *Kungsholm's* passengers using flash photography. When the rescue boat drew alongside the *Kungsholm*, a gun port door was opened, the plasma was handed out and a letter of thanks handed in. The rescue boat then returned to the *Durham* and was recovered, having only been away for a matter of fifteen minutes. Both vessels then drew apart, saluted each other and proceeded on their way.

Later that evening (24th January) all available hands assembled on the after deck of the *Durham* to attend the burial service of the young Norwegian lad.

The Doctor continued his care of the second casualty. He was assisted by two cadets at a time standing watches of two hours duration, thus enabling him to have short periods of rest.

The following day (25th January) the doctor reported a slight improvement in the second casualty, but, owing to the severity of his burns, medical supplies were rapidly being exhausted, and more were required. A radio message was therefore sent out to Atlantic Merchant Vessel Reporting (AMVER), which is run by the United States Coastguard Headquarters in New York, and, as a result, a

United States Air Force rescue aircraft, based at Santa Maria in the Azores, was made ready. At dawn the following day, the *Durham* was 900 nautical miles SW of Horta and stopped in the water with the C54 rescue aircraft circling overhead and in radio contact. The rescue boat had been launched to retrieve the supplies should they fail to land on the *Durham* when dropped from the aircraft.



Lowering the rescue boat prior to aircraft dropping run

Having first dropped a smoke flare astern of the *Durham* to check the wind direction, the aircraft made one dummy run, which was then followed by a perfect live run at 150 feet to drop the supplies by parachute on the *Durham's* after deck. After one final circuit around the *Durham*, the aircraft turned away and made for the Azores. The rescue launch was recovered, and the *Durham* resumed her course. The whole operation had taken less than an hour.



C54 aircraft on supply dropping run

During that day, the second casualty's condition deteriorated, and he died that evening. Later the same evening, all available members of the ship's company attended the burial service of the second casualty, a young Dane, and, on the stroke of eight bells, his body was committed to the deep.

The third casualty, suffering from superficial burns of the face and arms, was landed into hospital at Curacao.

Captain Hollingdale stated that, throughout, he had the full and able support from the Chief Officer, Mr R Michael, the Chief Engineer, Mr M D D Constable, the 2nd Officer, Mr C C Hufflett and the remainder of the ship's company. During this period, the Radio Officer, Mr P Newman, was continually on call and, at one time, was on watch for more than twenty-four hours. Dr W Ursell, the ship's Surgeon, was commended for his services to the injured men.

More than 70 official messages concerning this incident were recorded between British, Norwegian, Swedish, German, Portuguese and American nationalities – proof of the bond existing between seafarers.

Note 1:

In an AMVER bulletin, dated February 1962, the United States Coastguard stated: "*We are very much impressed by the seamanship shown by DURHAM*

connected with her very efficient boat work. Indeed, highest praise is due to Captain Hollingdale and the men on his ship for the outstanding efficiency and humane spirit under pressing conditions."

Note 2:

The following is an extract from a New Zealand Shipping Company Newsletter dated March 1962:

"The owners of the M.V. "JOTUNFJELL" are showing their appreciation by presenting Captain Hollingdale, the Surgeon, Dr. Ursell M.B.B.S., and the Chief Radio Officer, Mr P. Newman, with gold watches when the vessel returns to the United Kingdom."

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