

Submarine Rescue

Last updated: 12 May 2010

In 1946, the Aberystwyth lifeboat was involved in the dramatic rescue of 27 men from a stricken submarine. **Des Davies** is the last surviving crew member and he's written a first-hand account of the incident.



Article written by Des Davies from Aberystwyth

"This is the first-hand account of the part played by the Aberystwyth lifeboat Frederick Angus in the rescue of the crew of H. M. Submarine Universal P57.

At 8.25am on Tuesday the 5th February 1946, in response to a report from the Aberystwyth coastguard that H.M. Submarine Universal P57 was disabled taking in water and drifting in a N. Easterly direction 11 and a half miles west south west of Aberystwyth, the lifeboat Frederick Angus under the command of acting Coxswain Evan James Davies was launched in a westerly gale.

Battling her way through the heavy seas, she found the submarine together with the destroyer H.M.S. Southdown and the Fishguard lifeboat 'White Star' under the command of Coxswain Ben Williams (she had stood by the submarine earlier and had just returned from her station after refuelling).

Shortly after this, the New Quay lifeboat William Cantrell Ashley under the command of Coxswain Arden Evans arrived but on finding the other two motor lifeboats not needing further assistance, returned to her station. (It is interesting to note here that this lifeboat was of the old pulling and sailing type and that this was probably the last service launch of a sailing lifeboat around the UK coast.)

The submarine, which was now adrift having parted the towline to the destroyer, was wallowing in the heavy seas. Several attempts were made by the two lifeboats passing lines between destroyer and submarine to recover the tow but with the worsening conditions, these attempts were of no avail. Each time the towline was made fast and the strain taken on it, the line parted and once again the submarine was at the mercy of the seas.



For several hours and in the most trying conditions, these attempts had gone on and during all this time the stricken submarine was being blown further north along the coast and nearer to the shore. When abreast of Aberystwyth and some 2 to 3 miles from the shore, Aberystwyth lifeboat Coxswain decided to warn the submarine commander of the impending danger of drifting further on to the causeway (known as

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Cantre'r Gwaelod) and advised him to anchor in his present position where the holding ground was good.

Taking his advice, the commander then let go his anchors and gave the order to abandon ship. By the time the submarine had come up riding to her anchors, the Fishguard lifeboat was the nearer so she went alongside and with great difficulty due to the heavy seas breaking over both lifeboat and submarine managed to take off 16 of the crew.

The Aberystwyth lifeboat (the smaller of the two) then went alongside and by means of a rope from the conning tower of the submarine to the lifeboat, the remaining crew members started to get into the lifeboat by hand over hand down the rope. Three men successfully managed it but the fourth man was thrown into the sea between the two vessels as the lifeboat rolled away from the submarine. The lifeboat man, holding the rope for'd leaned over the side and with the help of another crew member, succeeded in getting him aboard.

Immediately after this, a huge sea lifted the lifeboat and sent her bow crashing into the submarine between the conning tower and the gun platform smashing a hole in her. Despite this, a number of the crew were able to scramble into the lifeboat. Then, coming full astern on the engine, the Coxswain got the lifeboat clear and came around again to take the remainder of the crew off.

The whole crew of the submarine had been taken off in less than an hour. The rescue completed, the Fishguard lifeboat returned to her station and landed her 16 survivors. The Aberystwyth lifeboat also returned to the shore where hundreds of people lined the promenade and beach to witness the return of the lifeboat with its 11 survivors.



Hot drinks were distributed to the lifeboat crew provided by Lt. Commander W. Wynne Owen who owned a restaurant in the town. The survivors were taken to a hotel and provided for by the ship wrecked mariners society their clothes dried by the Aberystwyth steam laundry."

- **Part 2 of Des' dramatic account.**
- **Des' photos of past Aberystwyth lifeboats.**

Have **Your Say**.

Eric Bennett got in touch with this query in May 2010:

Eric: "I have just been reading accounts of the rescue of the crew of P57 Universal where it mentions the Destroyer HMS Southdown. In 1946 I was an AB on the tug Empire Ariel based at Pembroke Dock. My own recollection is that the Empire Ariel was sent to salvage the P57 Universal that was in distress off Aberystwyth. On arrival at the Milford Haven Heads the seas were so bad that the tugmaster decided that he was putting the vessel and crew at risk so aborted the rescue attempt and so notified the Admiralty. The Admiralty then sent the destroyer HMS Roebuck which took the P57

Universal in tow and brought her into Milford Haven Harbour where the Empire Ariel took possession of the submarine. This is a lot different to what I have been reading on your website. Is my memory fading? I cannot see that I can be that wrong?"

your comments

John Morris, Fishguard

In 1946 I was 12 year old school boy who lived near Strumble Head in a house called the Castell, and I remember the P57 UNIVERSAL incident well. and have been able to obtain national news paper cuttings and photographs of the rescue. and according to all press reports that I have Lt. Commander W.F.N. Main of Cardiff the Sub's Captain was the last man off her...the Fishguard lifeboat off Strumble Head who picked up one sailor Thomas Thorton who had been washed of the deck of the Sub while trying to catch a life line.

Fri Jul 3 15:15:34 2009

Johnny Morrriis, Fishguard.

According to my records the Commanding Officer of Submarine P57 Universal was Lieut-Commander Main of Cardiff, he was the last man taken off the Submarine by the Fishguard Lifeboat White Star, and was later trasferred to the Destroyer Southdown.

Thu Jul 2 10:22:01 2009

Kate Swan (nee Rayner) from Newtown

After being put in touch with Des Davies from Aber, my sons and I spent an enjoyable afternoon with him recently, talking about the rescue of the crew of the 'Universal' of which my late husband, Alan Rayner, was commanding officer. My boys were able to thank Des for bringing their father safely ashore on that day in 1946 and we were fascinated to read some of the cuttings Des had from the local papers. We only have the ones from the national press which did not go into as much detail so it was good for us to be able to read quotes from Alan. We are very grateful to Des Davies for making all this possible.

Thu Jun 11 10:53:40 2009

Kate Swan (nee Rayner) from Newtown

My late husband, Alan Rayner, was one of the officers (second lieutenant?) rescued from the sub Universal in Feb 46. We have the newspaper cuttings and he often talked about it to our sons. He remembered how kind the people of Aberystwyth were to them. When we moved from Windermere to live in Newtown in 1975 we visited the lifeboat station at Aber to see the record of the incident.

Thu Feb 5 15:58:15 2009

Ron Davies, Walsall

I was on board HMS Southdown during the rescue, and remember it well. The seas were tremendous, we were working off safety lines, which was difficult enough without the high seas. It was that bad our tow lines snapped just like a piece of cotton.

Sun Jul 22 21:26:56 2007

Mavis Law, Cheshire

I am the cousin of Bernard Mannix as mentioned in the posting and my father was William Roberts who lost his life on the Aguila on 19th August 1941. I have got as Bernard said, photos, letters from families of relatives who sailed on

her and copies of listings of names of the crew and the wrens who sadly perished on their first voyage. I also have a book which tells of the convoy on that fateful voyage which gives illustrations of the Captain and also the Captain of the U-boat who gave the order to torpedo the AGUILA. It was 50 yrs before we finally knew what happened on that eventful night and my dear mother finally had answers after all those years. If you would like to contact me I will gladly help.

Mon Nov 27 09:52:52 2006

Bernard Mannix

My uncle William Roberts of Liverpool died aboard Aguila. He was 24 years of age. His daughter, my cousin, has many letters from people who also lost family in this incident, as well as crew lists. I did wonder if Shelley might like to be put in touch with my cousin? I do have a picture of Aguila somewhere but can't lay my hands on it immediately but will keep looking.

Tue Aug 15 10:58:31 2006

Shelley from Liverpool

After looking at a picture of the Aguila Wren Lifeboat, I was wondering if anyone could help me find a photo of the S.S. Aguila? My Great Grandfather lost his life on this ship.

- *If you can help, please email us at wales.mid@bbc.co.uk - Mid Wales Web Team.*

Tue Aug 30 09:35:04 2005

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Submarine Rescue

Last updated: 24 November 2005

Part 2 of **Des Davies'** dramatic account of a submarine rescue off the coast of Aber in 1946.

- [Back to Part 1...](#)



By Des Davies from Aberystwyth

"At 6.35am on February 6th, the lifeboat 'Frederick Angus' was again launched on orders of naval staff Officer Plymouth, requiring assistance in putting a working party aboard the Universal from the destroyer H.M.S. Southdown (which had stood off all night). The weather had moderated considerably from the previous day but the sea was choppy and there was a fresh westerly wind blowing.

The lifeboat proceeded to where the submarine was anchored and found the destroyer and the admiralty tug Mediator (which had joined the destroyer over night) standing by. The working party were transferred by the lifeboat from the destroyer to the submarine. Afterwards, at 8.35am, two men were transferred from the tug to the submarine. At 9.20am, a heaving line passed from submarine to tug, then a towing cable was hauled aboard the submarine and made fast by the working party.

On completion of this job, the lifeboat transferred 1 officer and 15 men back onto the destroyer whilst the submarine's anchor cables were slipped. The lifeboat then went alongside the Universal and took the remaining officer and men back to the tug at 10.15am. By 10.30am, the Mediator was under way with the Universal in tow (the submarine now had no crew at all aboard). The lifeboat then returned to her station at 11.10am.

The Aberystwyth lifeboat on this second day was under the command of the regular Coxswain John Daniel."

Written by Des Davies from Aberystwyth

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Aberystwyth Lifeboat Crew Submarine Rescue February 5/6 1946

First day

Cox. Evan James Davies
2nd Cox. Baden P. Davies
Bowman Ben White
Mechanic Jack Charman
Boat Signaller Desmond Davies
Crewman Morley Pryse

Second day

Cox. John Daniel

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James Jenkin, Jersey

Some public spirited individual brought a huge telescope on its stand and positioned it outside the public shelter opening on to the prom between the band stand and the Marine Hotel. He allowed us all to look at the submarine (I was 13 years old at the time)

Richard Daniel

my father is john daniel aka spanny

Phil from Wolverhampton

My Father was the Officer on board this vessel at the time - he served in the RN during the war. Apparently they drank the locals under the table that evening!

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Life on the Lifeboats

Last updated: 30 July 2007

Des Davies' family were closely connected with the Aberystwyth Lifeboat for over a century. Here are some of his photos capturing memories of a life devoted to those in peril on the seas and a painting of the SS Aguila owned by George Bunner.

- [Des' account of a dramatic submarine rescue](#)



Towing the 'Frederick Angus' along the prom.

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Des Davies was involved in the life of the local lifeboat crew from an early age. In this photo taken in 1936, he can be seen helping to tow the lifeboat the Frederick Angus along Aberystwyth promenade. Des is at the front left of the picture in cap and shorts.

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Jamie Sims, Cumbria

My great uncle crash landed his Hampden plane in Cardigan Bay on the morning of 1st Aug 1940 after running out of fuel. I believe his body was picked up by the crew of the Frederick Angus. Can anyone shed any more on this story please? I understand he was a very strong swimmer and had left the wreckage to get help. The motor boat 'Emerald Star' picked up the two survivors and one other body.
Thu Jun 4 16:32:20 2009

Godfrey Jones, Stamford ,Lincs

I have in front of me the photo of the 1889 lifeboat Elizabeth Lloyd and my Dadcu is 3rd from the left, back row. Can anybody tell me what happened on 7th October 1889 when they went to help the barque Arklow during a 'fearfull storm'?
Sun May 3 19:40:40 2009

Paul Grice

I know this enquiry on the web was some time ago, but my uncle, Lesley Grice went down on the Aquila, and I have done a bit of research, finding out the U boat captains name

and history, I have a postcard of the U boat that sank the Aquila and a couple of years ago, I sat next to a survivor of the sinking at a Battle of the Atlantic dinner.

Wed Apr 29 14:39:20 2009

Cathy Woodrow Liverpool

My granddad, Norman Woodrow, was ships cook -merchant navy- aboard the SS Aquila when it was torpedoed in 1941. He was aged 28.

Wed Feb 18 15:11:25 2009

Brian George, Mynydd Isa

i have now found the photo of my late father-in-law(rex owens)at the launching ceremony of the aguila wren.behind him strung between masts are signal flags.does anyone know what they mean?i also whilst serching in the loft i found a silver tea pot from the aguila.

Thu Dec 11 10:23:21 2008

Brian George

My father in law Rex Owens handed over the aguila wren ,on behalf of yoeward brothers the owners of SS Aquila sunk during the war.in which a company of wrens drowned.the ship was a passenger cargo vessal which sailed with sister ships between liverpool and the canarries from 1900 until the 1950,s

Thu Sep 11 10:32:18 2008

Derrick Wren from Tucson Arizona

Just looking for the geneology of the Wren family.

Mon May 19 09:11:40 2008

Dave Richards from Stafford

Baden Davies was my uncle through his second marriage and I stayed with him and my aunt during the main school holidays in the late 50's,early 60's. I remember well one Bank Holiday Monday, they launched the Lifeboat for as a bit of PR for the crowds and Uncle Baden took me on board for this occasion. I can only remember it was a hot day and the beach was crowded and for a lad of 11 it was fantastic and a great honour. My father told me that in the olden days when they did this display Uncle Baden's brother who was a champion swimmer in his time - I was told he held the record at one time for swimming Bala - would "accidentally" fall off the end of the Pier and have to be rescued by the Lifeboat. I had many good times down there with my uncle on the fishing boats.He was a character to say the least, you do not get many like him today.

Thu Aug 9 17:05:00 2007

Ron Davies A/B ex HMS Southdown

No relation to lifeboat crew, but I admire their guts and determination on the night in question. I was a seaman on board HMS SOUTHDOWN at that time. The seas were some of the worst I was in and we did a lot of North Sea work during the war, but those life boat crews were magnificent. Good luck to them all.

Wed Aug 8 17:12:17 2007

R.Hutchings Jones. West Kirby

Looking through the pics I find a photo of myself in the 50/60's with the Aquila Wren. I am retired now after serving 49 years with Aber, Hoylake, @ West Kirby RNLI. Remember me to Alan Blair Ronnie Hutch.

Sun Jan 7 20:09:34 2007

John Jefferies from Fresno, CA USA

Marvelous account and photos. My grandfather and several others were saved off Swansea in 1913 by a RNLI boat. Makes me proud to be of Welsh descent.

Thu Sep 28 09:43:17 2006

Dave of Melksham

I remember the Aquila Wren and the palaver in launching. Once the maroon was fired, there would be a pause while the lifeboat was dragged from its shed in Queen's Road along Bath Street (or Portland Street), Terrace Road (Windy Corner) to the Prom, where it was launched as in photo number 6. I was convinced it was done that way to give us kids time to get to the Prom to see the launch.

Fri Mar 24 22:03:23 2006

Emlyn Edwards, Solihull

As a small boy growing up in Aber in the 1930s, the harbour was magic. I spent so much of my time there playing in the boats, helping or most likely getting in the way. When my Uncle Jack Johnson was home, he had a boat called the Stella and I used to go out with him. At one time, he and Baden had a boat called the King George V which once caught fire and I think was rescued by the lifeboat, but as that was over 70 years ago my memory is not quite as clear as it used to be. I have in front of me a photograph of the 1889 lifeboat (the original I gave to the Nat Library). My Dadcu is 4th from the left sitting on the top. I have always been immensely proud of him. My dad spent 18 years at sea on Q boats Minesweepers and took part in the raid on Zeebrugge on St George's day 1918. He had the clasp given to him as one of the crews who swept the North Sea after the war. He wasn't one to blow his trumpet and i'm sure that people who saw him as a shy retiring man had no idea what he had done. Anyway I went to sea as an apprentice with Houlder Brother. My first ship the Empire Balfour was captained by Walter Smail whose daughter Heather was a WREN and was lost when the Aquilla went down. He was one of the guests when the Aquilla Wren was commissioned back in 1952-53(?). By that time I had left the sea after a very serious illness. I asked a policeman on duty whether I could pass through to have a word with Captain Smail, but he officiously refused.

Wed Mar 8 17:52:06 2006

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Life on the Lifeboats

Last updated: 30 July 2007

Des Davies' family were closely connected with the Aberystwyth Lifeboat for over a century. Here are some of his photos capturing memories of a life devoted to those in peril on the seas and a painting of the SS Aguilá owned by George Bunner.

- **Des' account of a dramatic submarine rescue**



◀ Collecting for the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. ▶

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

The RNLI has always relied on dedicated fund-raisers like Des and his family. This photo was taken on Aberystwyth prom in the 1930s.



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◀ Coxswain Evan James Davies ▶

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Evan James Davies, Des' father, was coxswain of Aberystwyth lifeboat from 1950 to 1954. He was also coxswain on the first day of a dramatic mission to rescue the crew of a stricken submarine in February 1946.

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Coxswain Baden P. Davies

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Baden P. Davies, Des' Uncle, succeeded Evan James Davies as coxswain of Aberystwyth lifeboat in 1954 and held the post for a further eight years.

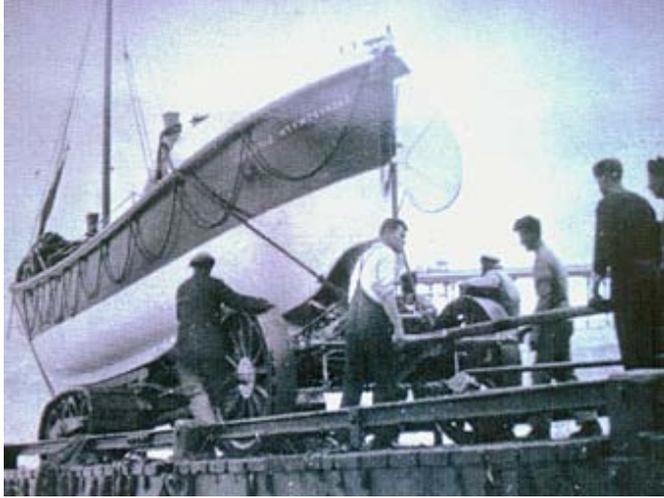
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◀ Launching The Frederick Angus lifeboat. ▶

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The crew of Aberystwyth lifeboat launching the lifeboat 'The Frederick Angus' at the slipway on the prom.

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◀ The Frederick Angus enters the water. ▶

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The Frederick Angus was the operational lifeboat stationed at Aberystwyth from 1932 - 1949. It was a self-righter and was replaced by a similar vessel, the Lady Harrison, in 1949 after being damaged at sea.



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◀ The lifeboat crew lineup in front of the lifeboat the Aguila Wren. ▶

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The crew of Aberystwyth lifeboat line up in front of the 'Aguila Wren' which was in service from 1951 - 1964. The boat was named in memory of 22 Wrens who lost their lives aboard the S.S. Aguila during the Second World War. One of the Wrens, Kathleen Miller, came from Llanbadarn Fawr. Des Davies is on the extreme right of the picture.

- [Read about](#) a dramatic submarine rescue involving the Frederick Angus in 1946.

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Life on the Lifeboats

Last updated: 30 July 2007

Des Davies' family were closely connected with the Aberystwyth Lifeboat for over a century. Here are some of his photos capturing memories of a life devoted to those in peril on the seas and a painting of the SS Aguila owned by George Bunner.

- [Des' account of a dramatic submarine rescue](#)



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This painting of the SS Aguila was sent in by Tom Bunner in July 2007. The painting was commissioned by his father, George Bunner in memory of his father who was lost with the SS Aguila. The plaque attached to the painting states:

S.S.Aguila

In memory of George Alfred Bunner, ship's boatswain, who was lost when the S.S.Aguila was sunk by enemy action on 19th August 1941.