

# ROUNDHILL S.A.C.



## PORTLAND COASTGUARD

A member of our BSAC club had set up a week end with the Coastguard involving a trip to the Coastguard Office and, hopefully, an exercise with the helicopter. Six divers went along; it was something we were all looking forward to but didn't know quite what to expect.

On May Bank Holiday Saturday we went over to Portland where we were meeting with Jim Anderson, a Watch Commander from the Weymouth coastguard. After securing the boat we followed Jim into Weymouth and went to where the Coastguard is based, this is where all the communication is done to co-ordinate search and rescue. We were welcomed warmly and, introductions over, we sat around a table with Jim at the front and started going over general safety issues. He asked us about our own set-up and presented some "what would you do if ...?" situations, did we have a spare outboard motor, did we carry flares, do we have a hand held radio, how often was our engine checked, etc.



Bryan said "We all know that familiarity breeds contempt, but we see it so often in boating procedures. We do buddy checks before we dive, but how often do we do checks regarding the boat? It is very sobering to go through a "What if?" scenario in your mind when you are out at sea with divers in the water. What would happen if our engine didn't start now? What if we had problems with the radio? What if the electrics go down? Answering these questions beforehand will make us into better, more responsible divers and save the coast guard quite a bit of work."

Jim also explained what happens when there is an incident; it's not just a case of calling on the helicopter, there's the name of the boat and it's position, type of incident, how many people on board, how many in the water, bottom time of injured diver, they will probably need the injured divers computer and his buddy to convey information about the dive, do the police and ambulance need to be involved (and if so coordinating all this). Obviously the better the information you can give them the easier it makes their job; information is vital, if it's precise and to the point. Until you visit somewhere like this you don't realise just what is involved.

After about an hour we then went down into the operations room, met the operators that were on duty, and saw the workings of the coastguard office. We had things explained to us such as the way the calls come in and are answered; we also had the opportunity to listen to calls coming in, and saw how their computer system



## WE WERE GIVEN RESCUE SCENARIOS



worked. All of us found it informative and interesting and we now have a better understanding of exactly what happens in the coastguard offices.

After lunch we went round to where the helicopter is based. We were taken through the hangar to where the helicopter stood and all got into it for a briefing about what to expect in a rescue situation. One thing we were told that if the klaxon went off "get off as quickly as possible and make you way back to the hangar",

We'd just had a look around and Paul was starting to explain a few things when the klaxon went off. Everyone left as quickly as possible and went back to the hangar, we

## WE SAW HOW THEY PLAN

stood and watched the crew in action and within minutes the helicopter was airborne. Being so close and watching how slickly things were carried out was fascinating.

After the helicopter had left Jim said that if there were no call outs we could do our exercise the next morning, so we arranged to call the Weymouth coastguard around 9.15 a.m.



We left for Portland bright and early on Sunday morning and launched the boat, then made the phone call and were told they were waiting for us to do a dry run, so we moored the boat up and went round to the where the helicopter was based.



Paul, who was the winch man, then explained exactly what was going to happen. We all had a go in the strop and were winched from the helicopter to the ground to give us an idea of what it would be like, once we had tried it out we were all eager for the exercise to begin.



It was agreed that there would be two groups, first of all 2 and then 3 who would be picked up individually from the sea, the winch man would come down to the first "casualty", place the strop aroundhe

## AND CO-ORDINATE RESCUES FROM THIS CONTROLROOM

around the knees and back and then the casualty and winch man would go up to the helicopter, (the casualty being horizontal in case of the "drop syndrome"), the same process for the next 'casualty' and once all casualties were aboard the helicopter the winch man would be lowered down to the RHIB and then one by one we would follow, with just one strap under our arms we would be

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lowered back onto the RIB. One of our number, Dave, had asked whether he could remain in the helicopter, watch everything from up there and take some photos which was agreed by the pilot.

We left Dave with the helicopter crew (Kevin, Richard, Roy and Paul), donned our dry suits and life jackets and launched the RHIB, going east out of Portland harbour for approximately 3 miles so we were out of everybody's way.

## THEN WE WERE AT SEA WITH JUST A RADIO

We saw the helicopter take off and come out to us, they called us over the radio to confirm if that was us they were flying over. The first two quickly put on hoods and masks. Now it was time to drop them in the water, and we moved the RHIB starboard 50 metres. The nearer the helicopter came the more the draught caught us ... the RHIB was all over the place, the back draught from the helicopter was



amazing, the sea around us became quite choppy. As we looked up to the helicopter we could see Dave, he was hanging out as far as his harness would allow, so as to take some good shots. Dave commented: "From the helicopter, and with a mass of water below, it's not that easy to spot 2 divers in the water, but with the bright orange RHIB close by we saw them. I wondered how hard it would have been had the RHIB not been there."

# IT WAS COMFORTING TO SEE THE HELICOPTER

Then the winch started to come down with Paul on it, he was giving hand signals to the men above to go lower, to go forwards, soon he was in the water next to Mike. He put Mike in the strops and gave the signal to be lifted, this really was great to watch, as they were being lifted the helicopter was starting to move forward, so they were swinging through the air, James Bond style. With Mike safely in the helicopter, they circled for a while, then went through the whole procedure again with Bryan. Once they were both in the helicopter it circled around again and radioed us to make sure our engine was switched off so that the winch man could be lowered into the RHIB. We were warned not to touch the end of the line until it had been in the water and earthed, otherwise it gives you quite a belt of static. Now, one at a time Mike and Bryan were winched from the helicopter onto the boat, Paul was on hand ready to grab them as they get near and was then winched back up to start the whole process again.

Barbara, Steve and Carole were 'abandoned' in the sea which was pretty calm. Dive Officer, Carole, says "Watching the helicopter come towards you with the winch man dropping down is an experience, being winched up was nice and steady and you hardly knew you were moving, before you know it you were inside. Sitting in the helicopter and looking

and we were in a position where we knew where the person was and can only imagine what that it must be like looking for a needle in a haystack." Barbara continues: "now I'm lying in the water on my own, the boat is quite far away and it's quite hard to see anything when you're lying flat, and I start wondering, what it would really be like if you were stuck out here for real, it's quiet, and I feel incredibly small. The noise of the helicopter coming back is suddenly a very welcome sound, as I guess it is in a real rescue situation. Soon Paul is being winched down to me, and very quickly he has me secured in the strops (now I have to say I'm not the best person with heights) but I have no fear, as I am laying flat so all I can see is the sky and Paul's face, which is reassuring in itself, He asks if I'm ok, and I answer yes, and I really am, I feel safe."



down the boat looked like a dot. Once Steve and I were in the helicopter we looked out for Barbara and had trouble spotting her; you don't realise how hard it is to spot someone in the sea

Once again the helicopter did a circuit then it was time for the last three to go back down, again the winch man went onto the boat first. The strap is placed round your back and you edge

# I FELT SAFE THROUGH THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE

towards the door, sitting with your feet over the edge, once the winch man and you are both happy off you go, the next thing you know you are 'hanging' out of the helicopter, there is no push or sudden jerk. When you look towards the boat it looks a long way off and you also realise how high you are, no nice reassuring face to look at now, just a lot of sea. Once all were back on board Paul went

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helicopter and gradually inched away from us.

We'd all got big grins on our faces, what an experience. We sat for a while, suddenly tired, in fact drained, it had been a long day, so with the sea drying on our faces we headed back to get the boat out and go and pick Dave up. By the time we had sorted everything out and were going round to pick him up the helicopter had been called out on a genuine rescue, the crew leaving their half-eaten lunches behind.



# WE'D ALL GOT BIG GRINS

We all agreed what a fantastic experience it had been, it's something none of us will forget, the words fantastic, amazing, brilliant, scary and incredible were just some of the adjectives used in re-telling the days events. Diving is great, it's exciting, wonderful, and no two dives are the same, but it's hazardous; there is no room for complacency, or risk taking, and there is no valid excuse for not keeping up with what's going on in terms of the latest radio, more advanced kit, or courses to keep yourself informed.



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It has been a real insight into what goes on with the coastguard and if there is a call out we all now have a better understanding of exactly what is involved.

We've only got praise for the coastguard, from the people in the operations room to the crew and ground staff of the helicopter; they were all really professional and competent people.

The six of us that took part in the exercise have every confidence in the coastguard and would like to pass on our thanks for everyone involved in what was a fantastic weekend, hopefully we will never need to use the service for real but would have no hesitation in calling for assistance should we need it.



### Special thanks to;

Jim Anderson

*Watch Commander, Portland Coast Guard*

As well as all the flight crew, control room staff who bravely ventured to have us as on a practise rescue run.