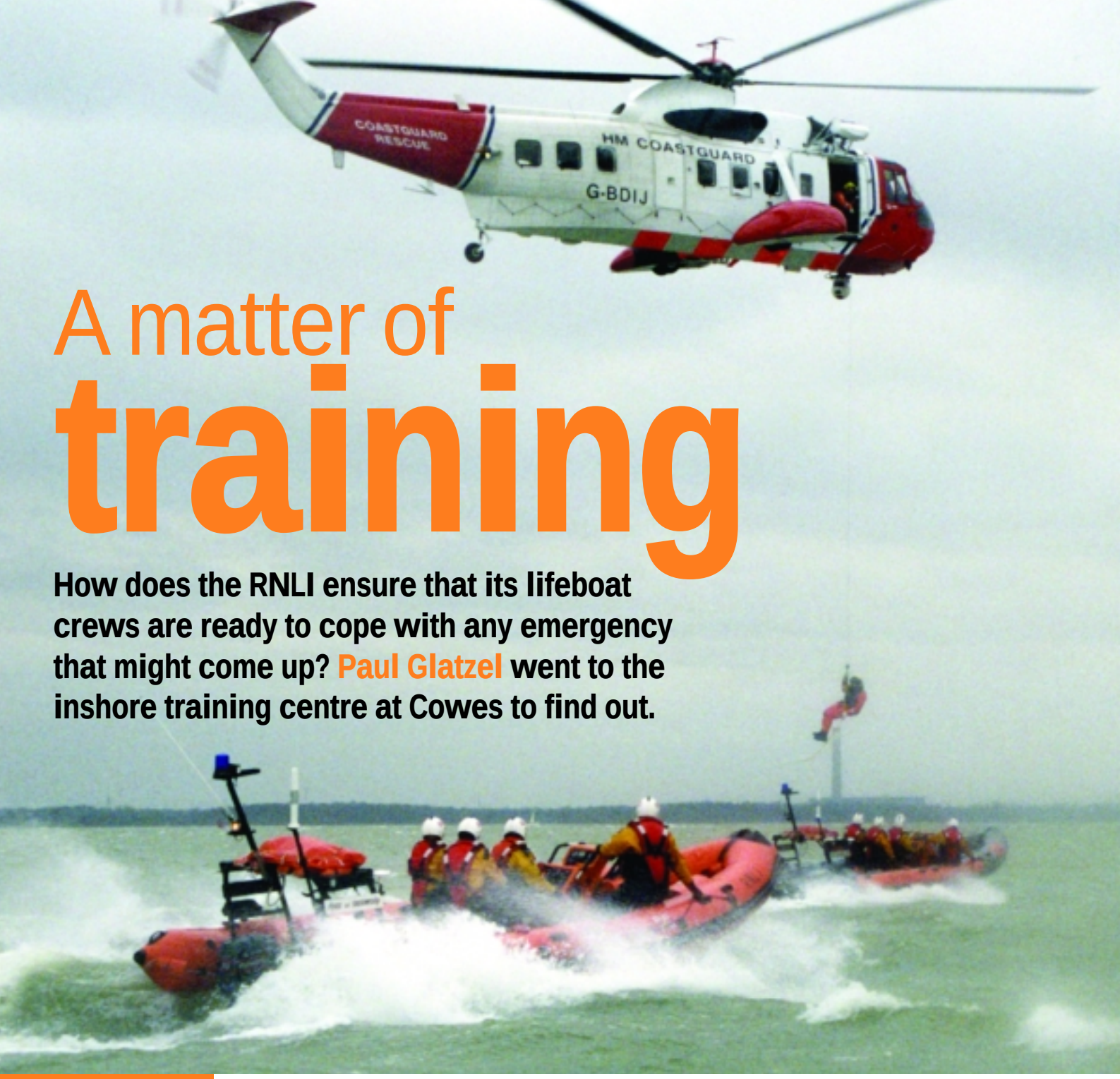
A matter of training

How does the RNLI ensure that its lifeboat crews are ready to cope with any emergency that might come up? Paul Glatzel went to the inshore training centre at Cowes to find out.



Above: The boats line up ready for the helicopter exercise
Picture: Paul Glatzel

If you are ever unfortunate enough to run into trouble at sea then there won't be a better sight than an RNLI lifeboat heading towards you. But who's in that lifeboat and what training do they go through? To find out, I visited the RNLI Inshore Lifeboat Centre in Cowes and took part in one of their RIB training courses. The Atlantic helmsman's course had already been running for two days but, from the itinerary I had, it looked as if I had arrived for the best bits.

The centre at Cowes is responsible for the build and fit-out of the RNLI RIBs and provides all inshore lifeboat training for crews from all over the UK and Ireland. The courses range from beginners' for new crew through personal watercraft courses for beach rescue teams to the advanced helmsman's course that I had been invited to attend.

The Atlantic helmsman's course is aimed at lifeboat crew who range from the inexperienced to those with 15-20 years experience. Our course leader, Glen Mallen, has been in the training team for about four years. Prior to this role he was on the Rye Harbour crew for many years.

Along with his colleagues he has been instrumental in the RNLI recently revamping its courses to adopt competence based training, bringing state-of-the-art training methods to an environment where, historically, training had occurred more on-station and by passing experience through the generations.

The week starts with a basic test, which everyone is expected to pass easily. Such an assessment may sound strange as you would expect lifeboatmen and women to be avid boaters. However, around 80% of new crew have no association with boating.

The morning I joined the course, Glen had started to discuss pacing. This is the method whereby a RIB comes alongside another moving craft at speed to run alongside it. This is such a dangerous manoeuvre

that the crews are banned from practicing it on station. The danger comes from the pressure waves that a fast moving craft creates around itself which, if not handled correctly, can cause the RIB to be pulled under the craft or back round to the stern of the craft into the props. Having learnt all of this, off we went to try it out.

There were six Atlantics in total, each with two or three students and an instructor on board. As we headed out to sea, Glen informed Solent Coastguard we were ‘search and rescue capable’ and available for any rescue situations that arose. Anyone running into trouble in the Solent that day would have had the mother of all rescues with so many Atlantics available to assist: nothing came our way though.

Pairing up we practised coming alongside our partner RIB, in some moderately bumpy seas. This was fun but never worrying, even when one RIB would land slightly on the other after hitting a wave. A strong tidal race (about 5kn) caused some fun as we practised coming alongside a buoy both uptide and downtide in rough conditions.

Next up was veering. Veering is the term given to using the anchor and engines to reverse towards a cliff or beach where it would be impossible to drive in due to breaking seas. We approached the 100m cliffs and anchored about 30m offshore. One crew member went forward to pay out the anchor line under the command of the helmsman, while the other went to the rear using two paddles joined together to depth test. With the port engine heavily in reverse we edged slowly back towards the cliff in a 3m swell, eventually ending up under 1m away. This technique is used to recover casualties from cliffs and rocks in seas that would be too rough to drive in to.

After an hour or two under the cliffs we punched back to Yarmouth through worsening seas to get a coffee and Mars bar at the station. In the spirit of cooperation and training, the Yarmouth crew of the all-weather Severn class lifeboat turned out at dusk to give us a bigger craft to practise pacing with. Now this was fun! Wind against tide and a Force 7 rising Force 8 and we were to drive our craft alongside the £1.8m pride and joy of the Yarmouth crew – they must be mad – or very trusting of our ability.

The technique with a larger craft is to drive alongside steering between the bow and stern waves. Once alongside the vessel, you power up and turn fully in to the vessel to hold position. This might not appear too difficult but it is, especially when you factor in the weather and tidal conditions, which made it rather amusing. Sadly we were forced to abort after the Atlantic before us in the queue to go alongside went vertical and looked set to land on the deck of the Severn.

So there we were just east of Yarmouth in what was now a Force 8 and it was pitch black. To get back we decided to execute the night navigation plan we had earlier prepared which entailed criss-crossing the Solent back to Cowes. I have never driven such weather at night. Indeed, the Atlantics won’t typically go out at night over Force 6 - 7. However it was really interesting to see how much better we all drove without the benefit of sight.

Inevitably we hit some waves badly but on the whole we drove the waves by feel and better than we had during the day. There was only one dodgy moment, when we hit a wave and went vertical before seeming to hang in the air and then being

Top: Rescue exercise
Above: The boats receive a thorough check
Pictures: Paul Glatzel

This article first appeared in Sportsboat & RIB International. Paul Glatzel is a powerboat instructor and runs Powerboat Training UK

blown backwards. We came down okay – albeit with a big jolt.

Thursday started with a brief on the morning's helicopter exercise, which was to kick off at 10am with the Coastguard helicopter *India Juliet*. While we waited for the chopper to turn up, we practised with the RNLI's recently acquired dinghies, kayaks and yachts, which are used to give first-hand experience to crews of rigging and de-rigging, getting sails down and so on.

Out into the Solent we met up with *India Juliet* and started our run up towards Cowes from Yarmouth into the wind: the helicopter needs to fly into the wind to maintain lift. We were to practise positioning ourselves under the helicopter allowing the winch operator to drop the winch man (a slightly mad individual in my opinion) into the bow of the RIB. Not too difficult you may think, until you factor in the need for the helmsman to drive into a Force 5-6 only looking up and not watching the sea. This is to position the RIB at speed within 1m of the target position under the helicopter.

After we had all achieved this we stopped and began a highline transfer. With this technique, a line is dropped into a stationary boat allowing the helicopter to drop the winch man in without hovering directly above – with a yacht this could be difficult and potentially painful if the winch man were to land on the mast.

This finished, back to Cowes for a quick bite to eat before getting stuck into a search and rescue exercise. We started the afternoon discussing risk and the need to ensure the safety of the crew in any rescue situation. The danger the crews face was brought home by a sobering video which saw a US rescue RIB trying to recover a dead diver from the water. A breaking wave flipped over the boat, throwing its crew into a vicious sea near rocks. The entire lifeboat crew were lost.

To give the crews a feel for the difficulties faced by the Coastguard in a search and rescue situation, teams paired into a lifeboat crew and a Coastguard crew, each taking turns to control the rescue or be on the water executing it. Each exercise worked well and we ran through a process where we were tasked to an area then undertook a search of the area followed by (in our case) recovery of a kayak and dummy from the water.

At the same time our Coastguard crew had been working from their very limited data ('I saw a kayak – I think – 1 mile offshore (or was it two) it seemed in trouble') then using tidal stream and flow data plus wind information to predict where the casualty was now. Overall the exercise worked well to show how difficult each of the aspects of the jobs was but also how the crews could influence the success of their search by forethought and planning.

I finished the day with a tour around the factory to see the Atlantics being made and reconditioned. The Atlantic hulls are made by Souters in Cowes and are of an incredibly high quality and build. The hulls then arrive at the centre to have the tubes, deck, console, fittings and engines added.

The fit out is exceptional, with almost every item being manufactured on site or, as in the case of the engines, prepared for their potential inversion if everything goes wrong. Every four years the Atlantics are returned to Cowes for a full rebuild to ensure they are always ready and working should you need them.

So what was my impression of the training and the centre? Overall, I was hugely impressed; the training was absolutely excellent combining an utterly professional approach with a light-heartedness that made the long days pass extremely enjoyably. The crews seemed to really enjoy and benefit from the course and were exceptionally decent people who take great pride in the job they do and the professionalism of their approach.

It was good to see at first hand what some of my *Offshore* membership fee goes towards and I think its fair to say that the training centre and factory is money very well spent. And the disappointment of the two days? Finding out I'd missed appearing on *Blue Peter* who were coming down to film on the Friday – is that why Glen had his hair done?