



[Alastair Morrison and the Wrecking of the 'Delight' (1953)]

Alastair Morrison, 'Alastair Challum Alasdair', or 'Slumman' as he was known, was born on croft 9 Calbost in 1908. He was the oldest of five brothers who served in the Armed Forces throughout the whole of the Second World War, 1939 to 1945. He served in the Merchant Navy. His brother Angus, 'Tom' born in 1914 served in the Royal Navy. Donald, born in 1916 served in the Royal Navy. Angie born in 1919 served in the army in Africa. Malcolm, born in 1921, the hero of the 'Arlington Court', served in the Merchant Navy.

On three separate occasions the ships on which Alastair was serving were sunk by enemy action on the high seas, and he had to fight for his life on the surface of the ocean. In 1940 his ship the 'SS Cumberland' was sunk. In 1941 his ship the 'Michael-E' was sunk, and in 1942 his ship, a tanker, the 'Aldersdale' was sunk. Providentially, his life was spared on each of these three occasions, only to come perilously close to drowning on a fishing boat in The Minch after the War.

After the War Alastair served as an engineer on the fishing boat 'Delight' SY 186. The 'Delight' was a 60 foot keel Zulu fishing boat, originally built for sail and skippered by Donald Campbell, 13 Gravir, 'Domhnull Ruaraidh Iain' at one time, but subsequently sold to a crew from Point who converted it to motor by installing two powerful 60 horsepower Kelvin paraffin engines in her.

In the winter of 1953 the 'Delight', like many other Stornoway fishing boats, was engaged in gill-net herring fishing in The Minch and on that memorable evening of the disaster of the Stranraer to Larne ferry, 'Princess Victoria', in December 1953, the crew of the 'Delight' shot their nets off Bayble in reasonable weather.

By 2.00 am they had finished hauling their nets with a good catch of about 40 crans of herring, and they set off for the market at Ullapool with a rising N.N.E. wind. The crew felt it was safe enough to carry out the usual task of cleaning the herring out of the nets by lifting the nets in an orderly fashion from the hold to the side decks as they proceeded on their way.

They had not gone far when the wind came up suddenly, and very soon they noticed that some of the boats nearby hove-to because of the force of the wind. Realising the gravity of the storm that was breaking out, they quickly set about to pull the nets on the deck back into the hold, but before they were able to pull all the nets back into the hold an unusually heavy sea struck the boat smashing the bulkhead and the bilge pump, as well as washing the mizzen sail, mast and some of the nets overboard.

The nets that were washed overboard fouled both propellers, and the engines stopped. The boat drifted helplessly with the wind in pitch darkness across the Minch towards the West mainland shores of Scotland.

The crew proceeded to set the remainder of the nets in the hope that that would act as a sheet anchor, and turn the head of the boat into the wind and sea. They also prepared all the anchors, chains and ropes on board, but the force of the storm was such that the sheet anchor made no impression, and the boat continued to drift helplessly across The Minch.

That situation continued all night and all the next day. By the evening of the same day they were approaching land near Gruinard Bay on the West mainland coast of Scotland. The storm was still raging and the crew knew that it was useless to launch the ship's lifeboat because it would be swamped and smashed into pieces against the rocks. The only alternative was to prepare buoys by tying two buoys together with the intention of casting themselves into the sea in the hope that they could cling to the buoys, and be washed up on the shore at a suitable place.

They spotted a stretch of sandy beach, but their boat was heading towards the rocky shore where there was little or no hope of survival. Quickly the crew prepared the mizzen sail which they had managed to pull aboard earlier, and they set a small part of the sail on the forward light mast in the hope of easing the boat round the edge of the island and on towards the sandy beach. Providentially they managed to avoid the rocky shore and they drifted towards the sandy beach.

At this point, the crew were divided in their opinion as to whether it was better to launch the ship's lifeboat and abandon ship, or remain on board until the boat beached. However, it was a time for each and every one to come to his own decision, and all the crew except three men decided to launch the lifeboat. They had not gone far when the lifeboat sank under their feet, and by this time it was dark again.

The men clung to the buoys they took with them from the big boat, one man on each side, and they did what they could to reach the shore, which was not easy in full dress.

It was a long shallow sandy beach with very heavy seas breaking over it. At length some of the men were on the point of being overcome when someone shouted that he could feel the bottom under his feet when the waves went out. That revived their spirits.

Eventually all the crew got ashore safely but exhausted. Two local men who had seen their boat earlier drifting helplessly met them. These two men reported a boat in distress, and proceeded to the beach with two bottles of whisky, which was highly appreciated by the shipwrecked mariners.

The local Naval Bomb Defence Officer and his men came on the scene shortly after the fishermen got ashore and they were taken to the Naval Base, and some to a local hotel where they were made comfortable with warm dry clothing and a hot bath.

In the morning they returned to the scene of the wreck and their big powerful boat was smashed to pieces, and what was left of it was lying face down in the sand. The two engines and the boiler etc were strewn all over the beach. Everything was lost. Boat, fishing gear and personal effects were all lost.

While the boat was covered by insurance, the expensive fishing gear was not, but mercifully, the important thing was that all the crewmembers survived, and they proceeded home to Lewis on the mail ferryboat in the clothes they stood in.

[ends]

AN ARCHIVE RECORD FROM THE ANGUS MACLEOD ARCHIVE www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk

Author: Angus Macleod

Date:

Original document title: The Wrecking of the Fishing Boat 'Delight'

Location in physical archive: Series K, File 2, Section 29

NRAS reference: NRAS 4336/1/9/2

© Angus Macleod Archive