



NCI Gwennap Head – Incidents and News 2017

Jan - Feb

- A man was observed walking his dog, off the lead, on the cliffside near the watch, in 40-50mph gale force wind! Since, by no means, could this be considered safe walking conditions, our watchkeeper kept an eye on the pair and was perturbed to later observe the dog leaping around the cliffside, with its owner nowhere in sight. This carried on for 15 minutes or so and, fearing the worst, our watchkeeper asked an off-duty colleague doing some maintenance work at the watch to go and investigate. The colleague did so.....and found the man sitting on a ledge just below the cliff-edge (presumably, sheltering from the wind), having a conversation on his mobile and totally oblivious to what his dog was doing! All's well that ends well but, really, is the edge of a cliff in a 50mph gale the best place to have a phone conversation while your dog runs around free on the same cliff edge?
- Our watchkeeper observed a vessel making a very sharp turn into the Northbound lane of the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme. Whilst this manoeuvre didn't contravene the rules of the TSS, it did serve to bring the vessel onto a 1-mile collision course with a vessel already in the Northbound lane! Our watchkeeper informed Falmouth Coastguard who monitored the situation and broadcast a suitable warning. Both vessels then manoeuvred in such a way that both had clear water.

Mar - Apr

- Our watchkeeper informed Falmouth Coastguard about a vessel observed breaking the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme rules, by trying to enter the Southbound traffic corridor, partway down and at a 45-degree angle
- **The Wreck of the *Torrey Canyon*:** This month (March), fifty years ago, one of the first-generation supertankers, the *Torrey Canyon*, ran aground (in broad daylight!) on the Seven Stones reef, between Land's End and the Isles of Scilly, spilling more than 100,000 tonnes of crude oil into the sea. The resultant oil spill generated an eight-mile long slick, which grew to 20 miles long within 24 hours and, later, affected large stretches of British and French coastlines. At up to 117,000 tonnes, or 1,231-times more than the amount leaked by a North Sea platform last year, it remains Britain's biggest oil spill.

In an effort to reduce the size of the spill, the British government decided to set the wreck on fire, by means of air strikes. Bombing continued over several days until the *Torrey Canyon* finally sank. Ultimately, a total of 161 bombs, 16 rockets, 1,500 tons of napalm and 44,500 litres of kerosene were used!

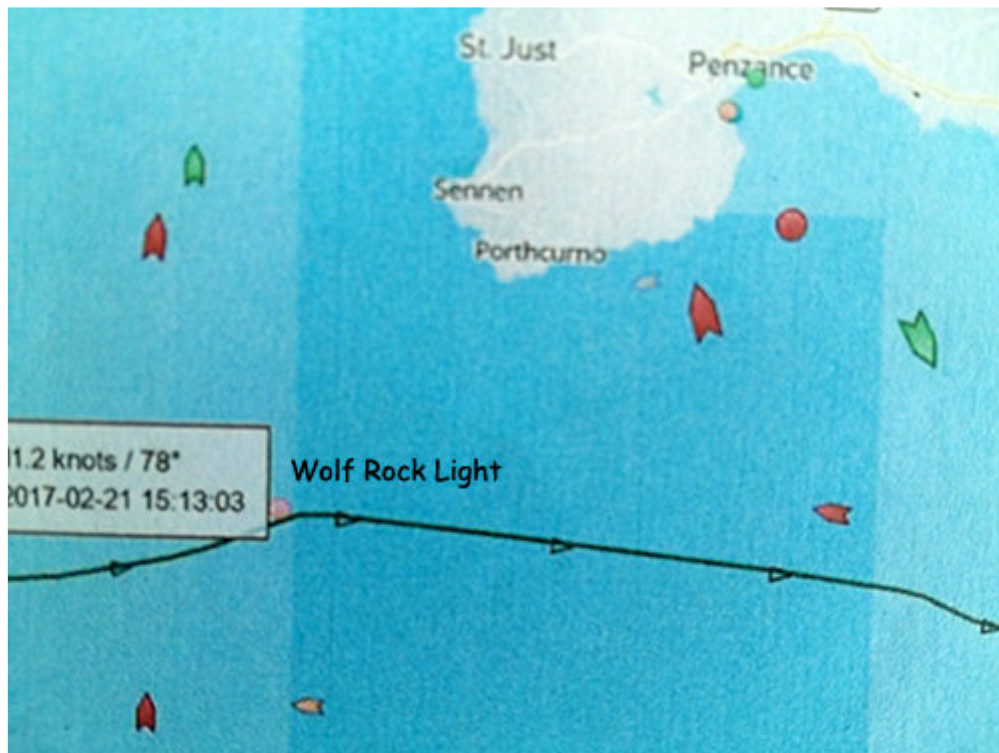
In total, hundreds of miles of coastline were affected by the oil spill, killing about 15,000 seabirds as well as causing enormous damage to marine life and the livelihoods of local people. However, although described as the UK's worst environmental disaster, it taught invaluable lessons about responding to disasters (especially methods for containing and cleaning oil spills), resulted in the toughening up of shipping safety rules and, finally, led to changes in the way that people viewed the environment. Nevertheless, ask any local what they remember most about the disaster and, inevitably, they'll still vividly recall the awful choking stench of oil hanging in the air for days on end....



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- Coastguard helicopter 924 contacted our watchkeeper on VHF channel 65 (the dedicated NCI Coastwatch channel) as part of an impromptu training exercise. Our watchkeeper stood ready to assist as the helicopter winched down a man and stretcher onto the rocks near the watch, and then successfully recovered both, before departing
- Our watchkeeper made urgent contact with Falmouth Coastguard after observing a cargo vessel, half a mile from Wolf Rock lighthouse, on an apparent collision course with it! FCG contacted the vessel which then altered course, accordingly. However, as can be seen from the track below, there wasn't a lot of sea room to spare - this is definitely not considered a normal course for vessels sailing past the Wolf!



- More canine capers! As they came on watch, our watchkeeper observed three dogs running around on the cliffs near the watch, with no owner in sight. Later two of them were seen in the vicinity, again, definitely unaccompanied. One of them remained in the area so our watchkeeper contacted the police on 101 in case there were reports of anyone (or any dog!) missing. A PCSO attended and 'felt the collar' of the miscreant (literally!), who was then 'banged up' in the watch. An 'identity parade' failed because the suspect had no ID collar so arrangements were just being made to call out a dog warden with a chip reader when a passing dog walker said "Oh, that's Bella, from the farm up the road". The police were then able to return her home but, since she's known as a habitual offender, her description is now posted in the watch, in case of further 'transgressions'

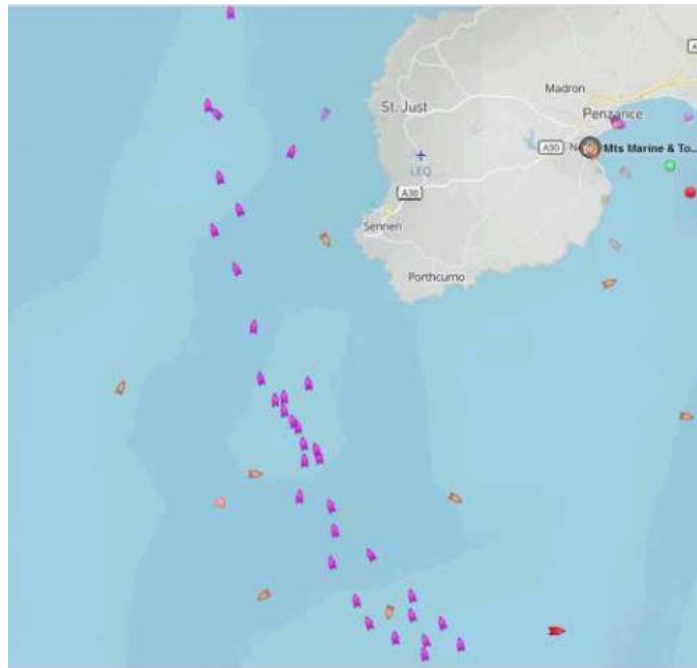
May-Jun

- NCI watch procedures call for all vessels passing through our sector to have their details manually logged, in case they're required for future SAR (Search and Rescue) purposes. That being the case, imagine the feelings of our poor watchkeeper when they saw this on their scope.



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The 62 (!) yachts participating in the 2017 Mini-Fastnet race were observed passing the Wolf lighthouse, before heading off to round the Fastnet light (“The Teardrop of Ireland”) and then, finally, back to West Brittany.

Fortunately for our watchkeeper’s writing hand, NCI procedures also allow large flotillas of boats to be logged as a single entry since, usually, they are being tracked by their own race controls. Accordingly, our watchkeeper was able to quickly record the flotilla details and then return to their primary role of maintaining a visual safety watch on local marine traffic and walkers on the South West Coastal footpath (which passes right in front of the watch)

- Our watchkeeper observed a cargo vessel crossing into the Traffic Separation Zone of the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme, from the Northbound lane, and then traversing the Southbound lane at a 45-degree angle. Falmouth Coastguard were informed and they immediately contacted the vessel in question. It’s master reported that he’d had to alter course due to encountering excessive rolling in the Northbound lane. Although rules are rules, a master must navigate their vessel as they see fit because, inevitably, the weather always has the last word!
- Our watchkeeper informed Falmouth Coastguard about a French trawler, observed to be across the middle of the Southbound lane of Lands End/Isles of the Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme whilst, somewhat worryingly, showing an Automatic Identification System (AIS) status of “Not Under Command”!
- As everybody knows, West Cornwall is a land of myths, legends and folklore. However, visitors who think that the only startling sight which they might see at Porthgwarra is Aidan Turner with his kit off (!), might have to think again. As the picture below (courtesy of [Kayley Barron, St Aubyn Estates Holidays](#)) shows, we appear to have our very own Monarch of the Cliffs - definitely not a sight which we’d expect to see here!

There have been several sightings of this guy (a mature Red Deer stag) on the cliffs around the Cove area, quite often in the company of grazing cows. Our wildlife officer says that, although



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there have been regular sightings of a small group of four Red Deer in the area, for the last three years, nobody knows where they came from. Sadly, there don't seem to be any more around so, maybe he's just lonely!

Anyway, if you're walking in the area of Gwennap Head and suddenly think that the heather has sprouted a [big] pair of antlers, don't worry, you're really not seeing things



Jul-Aug

- A busy summer continues..... two walkers arrived at the watch, reporting cries for help from two adults in an inflatable dinghy which had launched from Porthgwarra Cove, and was being carried away by the tide. Our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard who tasked the Sennen Cove lifeboat "City of London III" to come to their aid. On arrival, the lifeboat found that an ebb tide had carried the inflatable out of the Cove, towards Hella Point where, due to an onshore wind, it was in danger of being swept onto the rocks. Fortunately, the lifeboat crew were able to recover the two individuals and their inflatable without further mishap, and deliver them safely back to Porthgwarra beach.

Whilst we understand that visitors enjoy a bit of 'messing about with boats' on our wonderful beaches, please realise that Porthgwarra Cove and surrounding beaches can experience swift currents, strong winds and are generally surrounded by a lot of jagged rocks. Unfortunately, many of the cheap inflatable dinghies which we see in the Summer months (even if equipped with a couple of [normally small and ineffectual] plastic paddles!) are at the mercy of our wind and waves, and the combination of an ebb tide and an on-shore wind can quickly result in an inflatable being swept away from the beach and, then, back onto rocks.



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- All vessels over 300 tons must carry devices, called transponders, which form part of a global **Automatic Identification System (AIS)**. This provides real-time tracking information for all vessels and, as such, supplements marine radar in helping with general navigation and the avoidance of collisions (www.marinetraffic.com is a free web site which utilises this data to show real-time details of all vessels, in any location of the world). As well as allowing our watchkeepers to monitor all marine traffic in our sector, the ShipPlotter AIS software also displays emergency alerts which can be sent out via AIS if a vessel (or individual with a personal AIS distress beacon) gets into trouble. Consequently, our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) when two such alerts popped-up on their screen. Since the alerts appeared to be associated with a cargo vessel moored off The Lizard, FCG immediately radioed the vessel in question, only to be told by the vessel's master that he was testing his distress beacons and thank you for confirming that they were working! Testing emergency beacons is always a good idea but, maybe, a quick 'heads-up' to the local Coastguard, first....
- **Gwennap Head Watchkeeper Goes International!** The watch was visited by a Canadian family who were on holiday and were curious to know what we did. Subject to prevailing conditions, our watchkeepers are always glad to welcome visitors and explain what we do, and how the various pieces of equipment work. Plus, children always seem to enjoy looking through our big spotting telescope! In this case, the family was so enthusiastic and interested that they immediately 'FaceTimed' Canada so that children's grandfather in Alberta could see where his son and grandchildren were, what they were doing and what the Watch was like - we do get to show off Gwennap Head in some far-flung places! We're also [probably] the only Coastwatch station to have been blessed by a Buddhist monk (but that's a whole different story...)
- The summer is generally one of our busiest times for incidents and this year is proving to be no exception! The watch was contacted by Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) about a single-handed yacht in our sector which was becalmed and drifting, after losing engine power. Our watchkeeper was able to confirm that they had the vessel in sight and provided FCG with its bearing and range from Gwennap Head. Whilst the lone sailor attempted to fix the engine, our watchkeeper kept the yacht in view but, eventually, the Sennen all-weather lifeboat 'City of London III' was called out and took it in tow back to Newlyn
- Our watchkeeper monitored a partial radio message on the general VHF 'calling channel' which appeared to be describing details of people on board a small vessel. Since such information would always be part of a 'Mayday' distress call, and in the absence of any heard reply, our watchkeeper immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) with the information from the message. Falmouth were able to confirm that they had received the message and it was actually part of a 'Pan Pan' (i.e. a report of a situation which is urgent but not immediately life-threatening) which they were handling. Because of the line-of-sight nature of VHF radio and its susceptibility to atmospheric interference, partial radio messages are quite common. However, where they might relate to a potential distress situation and no reply is heard, watchkeepers will always relay them to FCG - better safe than sorry!
- The watch received a call from Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) who were concerned about reports of a rubber dingy, floating offshore, in Porthgwarra Cove (just down from the watch). At the time, our watchkeeper was unable to see anything but, a few minutes later, the dingy floated into view, with a single occupant, apparently OK. Our watchkeeper was then able to contact FCG and reassure them that the situation appeared to be normal but, as a precaution, they maintained a watch on the dingy for the next 15 minutes or so, until it and its occupant gently drifted shoreward's



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- A family came into the watch after their little boy had fallen over on the clifftop path and grazed his knee (fortunately, not too badly). After consultations with the parents, our watchkeeper agreed that a helicopter evac to Treliske hospital probably wasn't needed (much to the patient's disappointment!). Instead, a quick clean of the scrapes by Dad, and a couple of plasters from the watch's first-aid kit, did the job just fine. Interestingly enough, the opportunity of looking through the watch's main spotting scope also seemed to take the patient's mind off their wounds and helped dry their tears - maybe an alternative for the NHS to try rather than the use of expensive painkilling drugs?
- The watch was contacted by Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) who had received a call from a vessel declaring a hazard, but providing no further information. Further attempts to contact the vessel had been met with silence so Falmouth asked our watchkeeper if they had any information about the vessel in question. Since we maintain a log of all vessels in our sector, our watchkeeper was then able to report that we had no visual sighting of the vessel, and no AIS (Automatic Identification System) transponder record of it, either. As a result of this, FCG put out an 'All Stations' request on the VHF radio asking for anyone with any further information to contact them. We don't know the results of this call but then, that's not Coastwatch's remit - our job is to 'Spot, Plot and Report' so that we can alert the Coastguard to situations (or potential situations) in our area, and respond to any requests for information about them, in a timely and efficient manner.
- A search involving the Sennen and Penlee All-Weather lifeboats, the Sennen Inshore lifeboat, the Lands End Coastguard Search & Rescue Team and Coastguard Rescue 924 helicopter was launched for a snorkeler reported entering the water at Porthgwarra, but not seen leaving it. Our watchkeeper observed someone in a wet suit coming ashore and immediately contacted Falmouth Coastguard (FCG). However, after investigating, FCG established that the person observed by our watchkeeper was not the presumed-missing swimmer. Our watchkeeper was requested to keep observing the area of the Cove and report any further sightings whilst the search continued. The search was eventually 'stood down' after nothing was sighted and no reports of a missing person were received.
- Our watchkeeper informed Falmouth Coastguard about a vessel going Northbound in the Southbound lane of the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme! Falmouth immediately contacted the vessel and 'suggested' its master make a 90 degree turn (the proper way of crossing a Separation Scheme) into the correct lane. They also warned a nearby vessel in the Northbound lane about this manoeuvre so they could keep a sharp look-out for the offending vessel unexpectedly entering their lane.
- A walker arrived at the watch with her companion after sustaining a minor ankle injury whilst walking from Lands End, on the South West Coastal Path (SWCP). Whilst she was adamant that an ambulance wasn't required, walking on the ankle back to Lands End (approximately, 3 miles as the seagull flies!) wasn't going to be comfortable and also risked exacerbating the injury. With the walkers agreement, our watchkeeper phoned for a taxi which duly arrived at the watch and took her and her companion back to their accommodation at Lands End.

We understand that the scenery in this part of West Cornwall is absolutely stunning and so we appreciate why visitors are attracted to our beautiful stretch of the coast. However, cliff top surfaces on and around the SWCP can be very uneven in places and have the potential to trip up the unwary. Please take care when walking on the cliffs and/or the SWCP - we want you to enjoy our wonderful surroundings, not our county's excellent medical facilities!

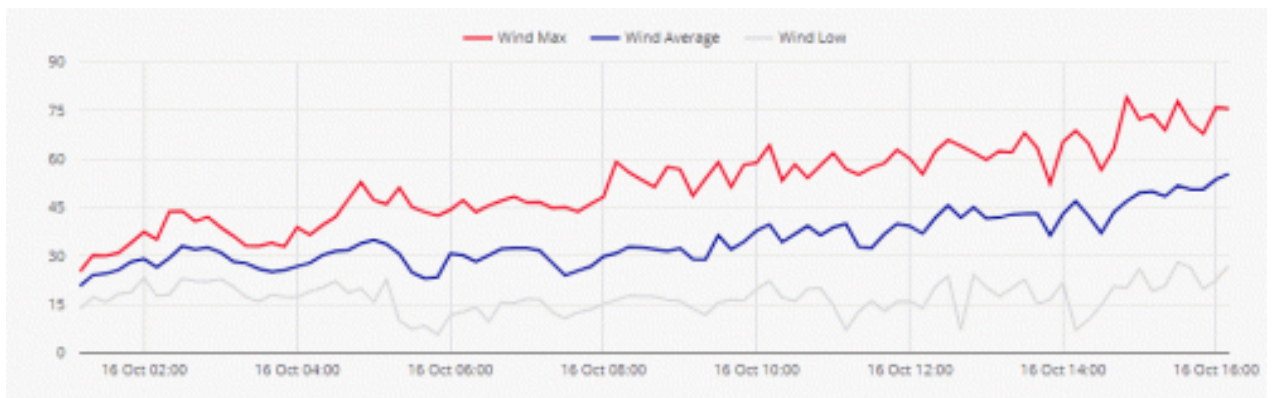


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Sep-Oct

- Our watchkeeper was contacted by Falmouth Coastguard (FCG) after a large cargo vessel came to halt around 3-4 miles South of the watch. Since this area contains many submerged cables, they were anxious that the vessel might be considering dropping anchor, leading to the possibility of cables being accidentally snagged. Our watchkeeper was asked to keep the vessel in view and report back to FCG if/when it started to move off...which it did around 30 minutes later. Interestingly enough, a week later, the same vessel was observed, temporarily stationary off the North Cornish coast, reporting 'engine problems'. Again, it moved off (limped off?) after a while and, as one of our more regular visitors, we await it's next appearance with 'interest'.....
- Phew, our watchkeepers reported it as being "pretty bouncy out there", courtesy of a visit from Hurricane Ophelia! To be fair, West Cornwall only got the edge of it, with Ireland bearing the full brunt. However, as can be seen on the Wind Speed track from our weather station (below), with gusts of up to 80mph, our watchkeepers were certainly grateful for the solid construction of Gwennap Head station. Mind you, getting in through the front door without being blown off the steps (or even opening the car door against the gale) was a challenge in it's own right!



- The Runnel Stone is a hazardous rock pinnacle, situated about 1-mile offshore from Gwennap Head, and, at low water, used to show above the surface until struck by a steamship in 1923! The Stone's position is marked by a South Cardinal buoy, and both it and the surrounding reef, are considered extremely treacherous. Records show that, between 1880 and 1923, over thirty identified vessels were wrecked, stranded or sunk in the area and, in fact, there were probably many more unrecorded incidents, as well. Consequently, our watchkeeper was alarmed to see a large yacht attempting to steer just inside the Runnel Stone buoy, 30 mins before an 'Equinox Super Tide' Low Water of 0.5m was due! Fortunately, the yacht responded to an urgent hail from the watch and rapidly came about, to go safely South of the mark. It was probably just as well they reacted quickly otherwise pagers for local RNLI crew would have likely been going off a few minutes later! When you're out sailing, it's always worth checking the tide tables because, sometimes, Low Water is a lot lower than you might think!
- Our annual exercise with Sennen Cove lifeboat involves them putting a dan buoy 'casualty' overboard and then retiring whilst the 'casualty' is allowed to drift away. Our watchkeepers are then tasked with keeping the 'casualty' in sight and guiding the lifeboat back to recover it, via directions transmitted on marine VHF channel 65 (the NCI Coastwatch dedicated channel). Such exercises play an central role in ensuring that all local elements of the Search-and-Rescue organisation work together, effectively and efficiently. Nevertheless, sometimes, the real world 'gets in the way'! A recent joint exercise with ourselves was interrupted when the Sennen Cove



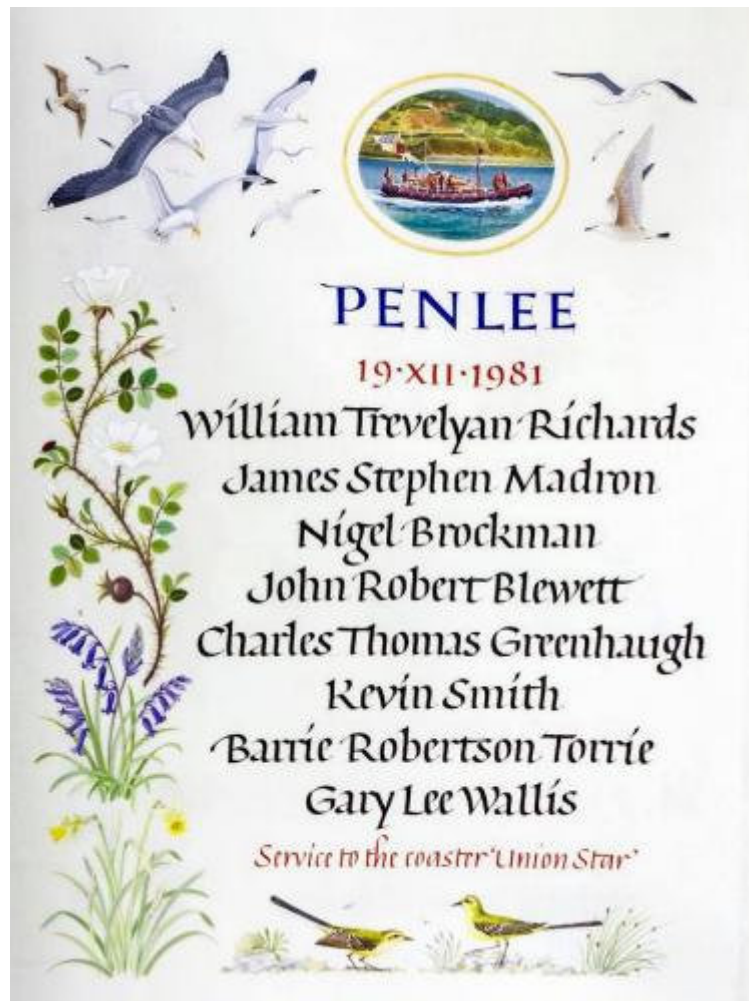
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lifeboat was tasked by Falmouth Coastguard to assist the Land's End Coastguard Cliff Rescue Team in a search for a missing person. The casualty was spotted in the water by the lifeboat crew, and the Coastguard Rescue helicopter, which had also been tasked, airlifted the casualty to hospital. Joint Exercises are important but they can be rerun at a later date; real world emergencies always take priority over everything!

Nov-Dec

- On the 19th of December 1981, the Penlee lifeboat Solomon Browne launched in hurricane force winds, to assist the coaster Union Star which had engine failure and was being swept towards the southern coast of Cornwall (in fact, the weather was so bad that Coxswain Trevelyan Richards refused to take two volunteers from the same family). Sadly, on that awful night, six days before Christmas, both vessels were wrecked, losing all hands; in total sixteen people lost their lives that night including all eight of the volunteer crew of the Penlee Lifeboat



On this day, as on every 19th December, the watchkeepers of Gwennap Head NCI remember the crew of the Solomon Brown as well as their current colleagues, all volunteers, from RNLI Penlee Lifeboat Station

- Our watchkeeper observed a cargo vessel illegally entering the Southband lane of the Lands End Traffic Separation Zone, half way down the lane. Not only that but they were also on an



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apparent intercept course with another cargo vessel, about 4 nautical miles away, also using the Southbound lane (properly, in their case!). Falmouth Coastguard were immediately informed and the offending vessel was subsequently observed to change course, 'giving way' to the vessel already in the lane.

