

All in a Day's Work

Kieran Cotter – Lifeboat Coxswain

PROFILE

Kieran Cotter lives in Baltimore, Co. Cork and for the last 31 years has been heavily involved with the Baltimore Lifeboat. Over the years he has taken part in many sea rescues in all kinds of weather. Here he tells us what it is like to be a lifeboat



Photo: Audrey Murphy

A Day in the Life of Kieran Cotter

Are you a full time coxswain on the lifeboat?

No, I'm a volunteer coxswain not a full time one, so I only get called out when I am needed. I'm a shopkeeper the rest of the time! At our Station in Baltimore we have only one full time crew member and that is the mechanic who looks after the boat.

How long have you been a lifeboat crew member?

I first became a crew member on the lifeboat in January 1975, became a 2nd coxswain in 1982 and coxswain in 1989.

What does volunteering on the lifeboat involve?

In a regular month we would have an average of about two emergencies where we help people and boats in trouble. We also have about two exercises, each one lasts about three hours; one out at sea and the other in the boathouse. Each year I must also do a week long training course.

Do you work alone or as part of a team?

I work as a team. There are 25 active crew members in the Baltimore area, 6-7 go out on the boat and some others work on the shore to launch the boat.

What happens if there is an emergency?

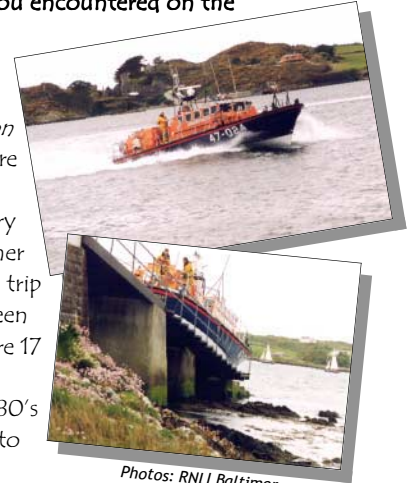
Once my beeper goes off it takes four to six minutes to get to the lifeboat station. I get into my wet weather gear and lifejacket and then get onto the boat. Our lifeboat is on a slip in a boathouse and all crew must be on the boat with their lifejackets on before we move. The mechanic starts the boat while the shore crew open the doors and prepare to launch the boat. Once we are outside the door the mast, aerials and radar scanner are put up and the navigation and radio equipment are turned on. Then we head off.

What safety issues must you consider when working?

All crew members must wear a lifejacket at all times and safety harnesses in bad weather that attach us to the boat. There are always risks going out in the boat in bad weather and accidents do happen but these days crews are very well trained and boats are very well equipped so the number of accidents have been reduced. 100 years ago lifeboats went out and never came back but nowadays thankfully everything has improved.

What is the worst weather you encountered on the lifeboat?

We were out in some severe weather in the 1990's, like when the tanker *The Kowloon Bridge* hit rocks near Baltimore and another time when we tried to tow a boat into Bantry Bay but we failed as the weather was so bad. The most famous trip in bad weather would have been the Fastnet Race in 1979 where 17 people died. We went out in some severe gales in the late 80's and 90's but it doesn't seem to get as bad now.



Photos: RNLI Baltimore
www.baltimorelifeboat.ie

What made you decide you wanted to be a lifeboat crew member?

It was what people did around here when I was young and also my father was 2nd coxswain at the time so I followed in his footsteps.

What is your favourite memory as a lifeboat member?

When we got our new boat *The Hilda Jarrett* back in 1988. She was a big improvement. She went twice as fast and was much more comfortable. Overall she was a much better boat. But she is now 18 years old so we are due to get a new boat in 3-4 years time, which will be a huge improvement again.

What's the best part about your job?

A lot of the enjoyment comes from just being involved.

What experience do you need to be a lifeboat crew member?

You don't need any. The RNLI has a one year training programme for crew members. These probation crew members don't go out on emergency calls but do go out on training exercises. There is also a week long training course in Poole in Dorset and then many other courses you can do if you want to get to a higher level. To become a crew member you must be fit, have good eyesight and not be colourblind.

What do you least like about your job?

Long call outs in bad weather. We have been out as long as 24 hours in bad weather. The lack of sleep is tough and you are not inclined to eat either!

What advice would you give to anyone wanting to be a lifeboat member?

If you live near a lifeboat Station go visit it and speak to one of the crew members who will be happy to talk to you. If you are not yet old enough to be on the crew you can always help fundraise as money is always needed to look after the boat and all the equipment.