



NCI Gwennap Head – Incidents and News 2016

Jan-Feb

- Falmouth Coastguard informed about a vessel observed breaking the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme rules by navigating down the separation zone between the traffic corridors.
- Watchkeepers in uniform attended the Shackleton Lecture, at Penwith College, organised by the Rotary Club of Penzance, to raise funds for West Penwith NCI (including Gwennap Head station)
- Falmouth Coastguard informed about a vessel observed breaking the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme rules, by trying to enter to enter the traffic corridor, partway down.
- 771 Naval Air Squadron, RNAS Culdrose officially stood down after more than 40 years of UK Search and Rescue operations, conducting over 9,000 jobs and saving over 15,000 lives.

Gwennap Head NCI gratefully thanks them for the dedication, commitment and professionalism shown by all air and ground crews during that time.

Mar-Apr

- Duty watchkeepers observed two humpback whales travelling West towards the Longships Lighthouse

May-Jun

- Lady cliff walker fell and broke wrist near watch. Casualty and friend made comfortable at watch whilst ambulance summoned and Falmouth Coastguard informed
- Watchkeepers need to be ready for anything. Foggy episodes In June caused many racing pigeons to get lost. One pigeon grounded near our wildlife officer at Gwennap Head, and was offered best quality wholemeal bread and fresh water (and even – whisper it - a chocolate biscuit). However, it was not interested, so it was then taken home by the watchkeeper, where it was successfully fed birdseed and more water. It then flew away and [hopefully] lived happily ever after. It was deemed unnecessary to inform Falmouth Coastguard about this particular incident!
- Information passed by Falmouth Coastguard and Devon & Cornwall Police, about a missing person. Description received and posted for all watchkeepers
- Drunks on the roof of Gwennap Head watch! On arriving early morning to open the watch, the watchkeeper found three 'happy' young males who said they'd been there all night. Our watchkeeper assessed the situation as friendly and offered advice about the risks to them and the dangers of the area which they had decided to use as their 'drinking den'. They moved away but then spent time close to the edge of the cliff. Their obvious lack of 'stability' gave rise to concerns for their safety so the police were informed. However, they left the area safely before the police arrived.



National Coastwatch

EYES ALONG THE COAST

- Extremely rare bird (Dalmatian Pelican) observed and described as “resembling a small plane gliding around in graceful arcs, at low altitudes!” Subsequently, lots of bird-watchers arrived in our area and watchkeepers were asked many variants of the same question viz. “Have you seen the pelican?” Sadly, in most cases, the answer was “No”!

Jul-Aug

- A local cove boat reported to Falmouth Coastguard that its propeller had been fouled, and that it was drifting 1 mile South of the Runnel Stone Buoy. Our watchkeeper informed Falmouth Coastguard that he had a visual sighting on the vessel, and provided bearing/range information to confirm the position already transmitted by the vessel. Penlee All-Weather Lifeboat was tasked to go out and provide a tow back to Newlyn, and our watchkeeper maintained visual observation of the cove boat until the Penlee lifeboat arrived on the scene
- Falmouth Coastguard were informed about a vessel observed breaking the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme rules by turning to port and crossing the Southbound separation lane at 45 degrees
- Contacted by Falmouth Coastguard who requested any sighting of a yacht which had been out of radio communication and, about which, concerns were being raised. Our watchkeeper was able to report that the yacht in question had been sighted from the watch, and its details logged, 90 minutes earlier.
- A group of Gwennap Head watchkeepers were lucky enough to be invited to tour our local Bristow Helicopters Search-and-Rescue (SAR) base, in Newquay.

Since 1st January 2016, Bristow has been responsible for all UK civilian SAR helicopter operations and, whilst many of our watchkeepers have seen the new Sikorsky S-92 helicopters in the sky, on ‘Ops’, this was our first chance to see them ‘close-up and personal’. During the visit, we were shown around both the facility and the helicopters by the duty flight crew (thankfully, without a ‘shout’ coming in!) and had plenty of opportunities to ask questions and see just how well-suited to their SAR role these new custom-built S-92’s are (and, for that matter, how big and roomy they are compared with their predecessors!). Since almost all the Newquay flight crews are ex-military and previously served either at RNAS Culdrose or other SAR bases, there is no lack of local knowledge and they are all very familiar with our West Cornwall coastline.

At the end of our tour, all the watchkeepers agreed that the new S-92’s are worthy successors to the much-loved 771 Squadron ‘Ace of Clubs’ Sea Kings, and that it was good to see the latest in SAR technology being deployed off our local shores. Gwennap Head NCI is very grateful to Bristow Helicopters and their Newquay flight crews for such an interesting and informative visit.

- As a change from our local trawlers, cargo vessels and tankers, watchkeepers observed and logged two graceful tall ships on their way to the Brest Festival where, every four years, the town plays host to one of the largest gatherings of classic and traditional vessels in Europe. The schooner Irene (1907) used to bring bricks and tiles from Bridgewater to Penzance, whilst the three-masted barque Kaskelot (1948) was a fisheries support vessel in the Faroes. Now, both of them are available for charter.



National Coastwatch

EYES ALONG THE COAST

Sept-Oct

- A passer-by reported to our watchkeeper that a couple were having a “very serious domestic”, close by, near the cliff edge. Naturally, the edge of any cliff is not the place to have animated discussions since heat-of-the-moment actions can have much more serious consequences than if they occur - for example – in your local High Street! Our watchkeeper kept a close eye on the situation in case help needed to be summoned but, thankfully (Gwennap Head watchkeepers are highly trained but relationship counselling is not one of their core competencies), after 20 minutes or so, it degenerated into a “Your Dinner is in the Cat”-type scenario, with one party storming off to the car park followed, after a few minutes, by their partner. Please remember that cliff edges are dangerous and can crumble without warning - if you must go near a cliff edge, you really need to keep your wits about you.
- Gwennap Head has held Declared Facility Status (DFS) for many years. This means that it is considered by HM Coastguard as an integral part of the national Search and Rescue organisation, and a resource qualified to assist them, as and when required. To achieve and maintain DFS, a station is subject to regular, external, all-day assessments of its staff, procedures, and training standards, as well as exercises designed to demonstrate competencies in our core tasks of “Spotting, Plotting and Reporting”. This ensures that the highest standards of watch keeping are maintained, and that HM Coastguard can have confidence in the professionalism of any station with DFS

In early October, Gwennap Head underwent its annual DFS assessment and passed with flying colours. The NCI assessor reported that “Gwennap Head is a well-run station with strong and effective management” and also that “There is clearly a good relationship between managers and watchkeepers, and there is a very positive working atmosphere. The lookout is extremely well organised”. It’s nice to receive such a very good assessment report but you can be sure that no one will be resting on their laurels!

- Our annual exercise with Sennen Cove Lifeboat involved them putting a dan buoy ‘casualty’ overboard and then retiring for around 20 minutes, thus allowing the ‘casualty’ to drift. Our watchkeepers were 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). The exercise was held on a day when the sea was relatively calm, but with a lot of glare reflecting off it, east of the Runnel Stone buoy. When combined with a fast (3-4 knots) westward drift, this meant that keeping the ‘casualty’ in sight was challenging, requiring plenty of concentration and teamwork. Nevertheless, the exercise was repeated three times and recoveries were successful, each time. Our thanks to all involved at RNLI Sennen Cove for their contribution in keeping our skills up to date.
- An impressive-looking Dutch three-masted barque (circa.1920) on it’s way to the Netherlands for a refurb suffered engine failure a couple of miles off Gwennap Head. After several conversations with Falmouth Coastguard, they managed to jury-rig a fix and started to limp back to Newlyn (at approx 1.5 knots!). Our watchkeeper maintained a visual watch until the vessel finally rounded Minack Point and went out of sight.
- Falmouth Coastguard were informed about a vessel observed breaking almost every rule of the Land’s End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme by illegally using the Inshore Traffic Zone, going the wrong way in the North-bound traffic lane, illegally crossing the Separation Zone and then partially crossing the Southbound separation lane, at 45 degrees - all in all, a new record for the number of apparent violations incurred by one vessel. Our watchkeeper monitored several ‘interesting’ conversations between Falmouth Coastguard and the vessel in question!



National Coastwatch

EYES ALONG THE COAST

- Gwennap Head received one of its occasional visits from the Royal Marines. After a spot of rock climbing in front of the watch, they then indulged in some 'light' PT under the benevolent (!) gaze of their NCO. Of course, being Marines, regular push-ups simply weren't good enough. Instead, they were doing handstands and then performing push-ups from the vertical position! After working up a nice sweat, they then double-timed it to Porthgwarra Cove where, after shouldering granite boulders, they all strolled off towards Lands End. As our watchkeeper said "I don't know what they do to the enemy, but they scare the hell out of me!"

Nov - Dec

- On the 19th of December 1981, the Penlee lifeboat Solomon Browne (ON 954) 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. After the Solomon Browne had managed to rescue four people, all radio contact was lost.

On that terrible night, six days before Christmas, both vessels were wrecked, losing all hands; in total sixteen people lost their lives that night including the eight volunteer crew of the Penlee Lifeboat, who were:

Coxswain Treveleyan Richards, Second Coxswain/Mechanic Stephen Madron, Assistant Mechanic Nigel Brockman, Emergency Mechanic John Blewett, Crewman Charlie Greenhaugh, Crewman Kevin Smith, Crewman Barrie Torrie. Crewman Gary Wallis

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,

- The watch was contacted by Sennen Cove Lifeboat station after a single-handed yacht, which had been towed into harbour the previous night after experiencing problems off Cape Cornwall, set out for Newlyn. Due to prevailing sea conditions and, in view of the fact that the yacht was intending to steer a course landwards of the Longships Lighthouse (which can be 'bumpy' at the best of times!), the watch was requested to monitor the safe passage of the yacht through our sector. Our watchkeeper did so, although keeping the yacht in view at all times was challenging due to a significant swell pitching the vessel about, fairly severely. The yacht finally reached calmer waters east of the Runnel Stone buoy and set course in the direction of Newlyn, by which time, the lone yachtsman was probably glad to sight a calm ('ish) harbour!
- The watch was contacted by Falmouth Coastguard after a member of the public reported seeing "a big cloud (or puff) of black smoke" somewhere (!) in Mounts Bay. Our watchkeeper was able to reassure FCG that nothing in our watch sector was responsible and that, as far as Gwennap Head NCI was concerned, all was well.
- Falmouth Coastguard were informed about a vessel observed breaking the Lands End/Isles of Scilly Traffic Separation Scheme rules by going South in the Northbound lane!
