Milford Haven Disaster

One of the newest conversions of the LCT to be got ready in time for the invasion of Sicily was the LCG – landing craft gun, a powerful new support craft designed to engage the enemy's shore defences during marge-scale landings. But the speed of the LCG's introduction brought about an appalling disaster in which the enemy played no part.

As the converted LCT's gathered at Belfast docks in April 1943 none of them would have been recognised by their former crews, for each now carried two 4.7 in. guns, giving them the look of miniature destroyers. The guns, one mounted for'ard and the other aft, were actually taken from old destroyers, and in addition there were Oerlikons mounted each side of the bridge for anti-aircraft fire.

To save time only as partial deck had been fitted to each craft. This stretched for three-quarters of the length of the vessel, leaving a large open space for'ard in front of the sealed-off ramp. Everything about the conversion had been done hastily, almost as if the 'Second Front' in Europe was about to open. Like the LCFs, each craft had a naval commander and crew and carried a large contingent of Royal Marines to man the guns. Selection of the Royal Marine detachments had been as hurried as the work on the craft; for many of the young Marines, trained in Portsmouth, their crossing to Belfast to join the LCGs was their first time at sea.

The LCGs, to the older hands, looked very small and top heavy, while the open space between the end of the deck and the blunt bow was a puzzling feature; more than one man was heard to comment that it would make an ideal swimming pool if filled with water.

There were no sea trials for the LCGs. Normally with refitted craft these were carried out near to harbour with some of the head men of the refit team on hand to see that their work had been properly done. Instead for the LCGs the only trials were brief target exercises to get the Marines used to the 4.7 Nordales, big guns with a very big recoil. Orders then came for LCGs 15 and 16 to sail ahead of the flotilla to Falmouth. These two craft which lay side by side in the docks, had been the first to be converted.

They were now to sail before the rest of the flotilla as a test of their seaworthiness carrying all the extra weight. The other craft wold follow them down to Falmouth, and there they would all be briefed on their final destination.

So LCGs 15 and 16 left Belfast on a course for Holyhead – 'Just a quick hop across the Irish Sea in order to gain your sea legs', as LCG 16's commander described the passage to his company. Visibility was excellent and the weather forecast good, and each craft made fair headway considering the blunt bows that had to be propelled through the water. At Holyhead they took on supplies and fresh water; then, although the weather had now deteriorated, they set course for Falmouth.

They left harbour together, LCG 15 leading, and as soon as they cleared the breakwater they hit rough seas, which got worse as they pushed on south to the waters off Cardigan Bay.

Aboard LCG 16 was Sergeant Maurice Jetten, a veteran in a mostly raw young company; a strong six-footer aged twenty-three, he had been in the Marines since the age of fourteen, and had joined the LCG after service in a cruiser on convoys to Russia and Malta.

'It was around noon that I noticed LCG 15 was well ahead and we were not making the same headway, also the change in the weather was causing a lot of motion to the craft and a few white

faces were to be seen. Our two volunteer cooks, one a naval rating and one a Marine, were the first victims, what with the smell of the cooking and the roll and heave of the craft, so it was decided to relieve them before there were added rations to the pans. There were many abstentions from the midday meal and most of the rations, together with a breakfast here and there, were passed to the gulls following hopefully behind.

'LCG 15 was now disappearing over the horizon and a fault had developed in our compass. Our captain was not happy with this failure, and our loss of engine power, which had caused us to drop behind, for there were clear signs now that we were in for a rough passage. Our petty officer motor-mechanic was called to the bridge and after a long discussion told the captain he would do his best; the loss of speed and the wind was pushing the craft off course.

'Rough weather routine was carried out, and with more than half the ship's company feeling its effects a normal routine job was taking twice the time to do. Extra care was given to our small dinghy, which was our only means of transport from craft to shore. Our other apparatus for survival consisted of one small raft about four feet square, and two flotanets.

'All watertight hatches had to be closed because of the amount of water we were shipping, and the space for'ard, between the end of the deck and the bow, was starting to look like a swimming pool. This was caused by flotsam coming over the top and continually blocking the outlets. As fast as the outlets were cleared, in it would come again.'

Down in the engineroom, with the craft sailing in head-down fashion because of the flooded space for'ard, the men were fully stretched. Stoker Dennis Dryhurst: 'The propellers and rudder were out of the water most of the time so we virtually had no control. The other stoker and myself were on our feet all the time coping with the main and generating engines each side of the craft. Everyone on board from the captain down to the last man worked hard and tried to keep each other in good spirits. We even arranged with permission from the captain to attend the wedding of one of the lads when we reached Falmouth; he was just eighteen years old and was in a real predicament as he had got three girls into trouble. One day he made us all laugh by declaring, "I've got a letter from all the girls, but I think I will marry the one that's gone furthest"; and so it was all arranged.'

By now LCG 16 was completely off course but hopefully battling on in the right direction. Sergeant Jetten: 'A grey shape headed towards us which turned out to be a Free French destroyer. She stopped, asked if we needed any help and gave us our correct bearing. We were thirty miles from Fishguard, and it was in this direction we now headed.

'The coastline was a welcome sight and the tension on a few faces of the crew disappeared. The first sign of life from shore was a winking signal lamp. This could not be deciphered, it seemed they were asking the code for the day, and when we did not reply out came two motor torpedo boats to investigate who and what we were. After being cleared and given the code we headed down the Pembrokeshire coastline towards Milford Haven.

'The weather worsened. The Welsh coast was the last place to be in a small craft with two large guns and a gale force wind blowing. We were again making very slow progress and the water was finding its way through onto the main decks, some coming up from the bilges and some through bulkheads. The pump could not cope with all this water and was slowly failing and we could only hope the engine would last out to Milford Haven. The seriousness of the situation had not been made known to the crew, the captain, a lieutenant RNVR, having decided to withhold this until the right moment.

‘We had not seen or heard from LCG 15 since she first moved out of sight, but there was strong evidence that all was not well. I reported to the captain that a flotanet, like the ones she carried, had been sighted in the sea off the port side. It was hoped this had been accidentally lost over her side in the rough weather.’

Battling on through the storm sweeping St. George’s Channel they rounded the coast of Pembrokeshire. ‘In the distance we could see the entrance to Milford Haven, which seemed to be a very small opening on a rugged and formidable coastline. We were making very slight headway in the rough seas and strong gale, and a cheer went up from the deck when a sloop was reported by a lookout – she was moving in our direction.

The old escort sloop HMS Rosemary, which dated from World War 1, had been directed to the rescue by the officer commanding the naval base at Milford Haven. ‘As she approached us we prepared to get a tow line aboard. Because of the heavy sea running she had to keep a good distance away to avoid collision. A number of attempts to fire a line across failed, and each time a grass line was played out for us to pick up we were unable to manoeuvre quickly enough and it was washed out of our reach.’

After coming in close and narrowly avoiding a collision ion the tossing seas, *Rosemary* then tried another manoeuvre, a highly dangerous one in such conditions. Six volunteers climbed into her whaler….

‘We saw that her crew were manning one of her boats and our captain was greatly concerned for their safety. But they were determined to get a tow line across. They started to row towards us, and the next moment the boat was engulfed by a huge wave and completely swamped. We could see its crew of six struggling in the water. Although they wore lifejackets they were hampered by their heavy sea gear and one by one they disappeared before our eyes. We, like their own ship, were powerless to help them.

‘*Rosemary* immediately began to search for any survivors. Our own craft was caught in strong current and we soon found ourselves on our own again. Flooding below was now becoming a hazard and none of the crew were allowed down to their quarters. Down in the engineroom they were still bravely nursing our engines.

‘I was asked to a meeting on the bridge, where the captain now confirmed that the craft was in serious trouble and we could not be certain of receiving any further help from the shore. As the sky was showing signs of night clouds I asked if could try to beach the craft so that each man might have some chance of survival. It was agreed to do this, the crew were told and our engine men were asked for a special effort to raise as much power as possible. We checked our survival gear and found that the dinghy had received such a pounding one of its sides had caved in, but the raft and flotanets were still in good order.

‘The captain waited until our blunt bow pointed towards the sore, then gave the order ‘Full ahead’. Our propellers were more often out of the water than in, the whole craft seeming as if it would shake to pieces. Every time we got near to the rocks the strong currents took over and carried us out to sea again. Four times we tried this manoeuvre, with the same results, until the engine men told us the engine would hav to be turned off or it would burn out.

‘The captain now called the crew together and explained that in the darkness our best plan was to ride the night out in the bay. For the younger men’s benefit he assured us that help would be

waiting when it got light, but if it came to an emergency, just to follow orders and everyone would come through.

'We formed a "bucket chain", using anything that would hold water, to try to stem the flooding. At first this proved a success, but as the night wore on it was seen that the craft was becoming waterlogged and it was quite clearly only a matter of time before she went down – at the rate at which the water was coming in one could only guess how long she would remain afloat.

'We positioned our raft and flotanets so that at whichever angle she went down they would float clear. We even put the broken dinghy in position, thinking it might be of some assistance in the water. It was calculated that we were about two miles from shore – so close and yet so far away. Everyone had taken off their heavy clothing and seaboots, so that we were feeling the effects of the cold night air. Concern was felt for six of the crew who could not swim. They were told it was their job to manhandle the raft over the side, and when they got it in the water they were to hang on to its sides.

'The captain praised all the crew, saying that no one throughout the day had failed in his duty. In our own minds the captain himself was worthy of the highest award for his great devotion to duty. …'

Stoker Dryhurst: 'The captain asked the other stoker and myself to go down the paint locker for'ard to get some sperm oil to soak a duffle coat to light and make distress signals, as we had used up all the flares. The motor-mechanic, who was younger than myself and was doing his duty turn in the engineroom got very worried so I told him to go up on deck and I took over his watch. I had a pint bottle of neat rum in my locker so I took a good drink of it – and maybe it was this that kept my circulation going in the water later.'

As LCG 16 battled against odds to keep afloat her company could not know of the tragedy which had overtaken LCG 15 earlier. Ashore at the village of Angle, on the east side of the entrance to Milford Haven, the villagers had received the first warning of LCG 15's plight while they were gathered in church at evening service with the storm raging outside. It was 6.30 p.m. on this day, April 25, 1943 - Easter Sunday – when a maroon went up from the lifeboat station fired by the man in charge of the Life Saving Apparatus company. The LSA men hurried from church to report for duty. The Angle lifeboat was temporarily out of service having its engines overhauled, so the lifeboatmen joined the twenty men of the LSA company and the rescuers set out in a body in the teeth of the worst gale known in the area for years. Their mission to try to save men of LCG 15. The rocket apparatus, which fired a line into a wreck to allow the operation of a life-saving buoy was bundled into a lorry along with other gear. A large number of the rescuers were ordered to a point on the coast off Sheep Island, where distress signals had told that LCG 15 had foundered. They swept the storm-tossed seas with their searchlights but there was no sign of the landing craft, only the desperate sight of men struggling in the waters off the perilously rocky coast. Others of the rescuers followed the cliffs south to Picker Bay, from where they could see bodies washing along to Freshwater West. Here other rescuers had arrived until there were hundreds there – the LSA company from Castlemartin, men of the RAF and an AA battery, coastguards and troops of a Parachute Battalion stationed at Castlemartin. From the cliffs they could see wreckage in the sea and men apparently swimming, but without rescue lines they were powerless to help and could only watch horrified as the unfortunates below were thrown in by the raging seas and battered against the rocks. One officer tied a rope round his waist and got into the sea but had to be pulled out again before he too was pummelled to death. It was a terrible scene in the stormy darkness and all they could do after

descending the cliffs was to get the battered bodies out of the rocks. The craft's dinghy had got away full of men but overturned on nearing the rocks and every man perished.

There was not a single survivor from LCG 15. …

At 10 p.m. the St. David's lifeboat station, far to the north-west of Milford Haven, received a message from the coastguards that there was a tank landing craft in distress one mile SSE of St. Ann's Head. The puzzled station secretary, Dr. Joseph Soar, immediately queried the call, for by practice the Angle lifeboat should have been called out as it was so very much closer to the position given and could be there in a fraction of the time. At the same time he assembled the St. David's crew without delay and at 10.35 p.m. the boat was ready to launch. Still no explanation came as to why the Angle lifeboat was not answering the emergency, which was very strange for although in wartime the Admiralty had some control over lifeboats the usual procedure had not altered and the Angle lifeboat had not been reported 'off service' to anyone. The St. David's boat now received definite instructions to launch, and Dr. Soar handed the coxswain a copy of the messages and information received from the naval base at Milford Haven. The lifeboat *Swn-y-Mor* was launched at 10.45 p.m.

The boat pushed off into very heavy seas on its long passage across St. Brides Bay and round the headland past Skomer and Skokholm islands to reach the entrance to Milford Haven.

Stoker Dryhurst had been on watch alone for an hour in LCG's engineroom when the craft listed badly on her port side. Up above the night was pitch dark with fierce seas and a 70 miles an hour gale. 'One of the lads shouted down to me to put on my lifejacket and take off my shoes and stand by as she was going over fast. I did this and just managed to get out of the engineroom, scramble over to the starboard side and hold the deck-rail as she took the final roll over, then jump from the deck-rail just in time to clear myself from going under the deck and being dragged down.'

Sergeant Jetten saw the huge wave that came in from the port side and lifted the craft up. 'The water inside the craft, which was like a ballast, shifted to starboard and before we could right ourselves a second wave caught her and she turned over. She remained afloat long enough for all in the water to see her flat bottom, and her propellers, like two huge antennae, watching us. Then she was gone and with her went our captain.

'Two of our non-swimmers were hanging on to the raft, the other four had been caught under the craft with others when she turned over. There was no sign of the flotanets. We had a count, there were twenty-one men in the water and the raft was in great demand. Turns were taken two at a time to sit on it while the remainder clung to the sides.

'The coldness of the water started to take its toll and as the waves kept turning the raft over so as less number each time were able to swim back. We lost our two non-swimmers and many more, till eventually our number had dwindled to nine.

'I had joined the Royal Marines as a young bugler and been taught discipline from an early age and, ashore or afloat, attendance at church without fail on a Sunday morning, and I feel no shame in saying that during that night I said my prayers a few times, and others joined in. I felt I had everything to live for; I had not long been married to a young and beautiful woman.

'With our numbers down to nine there was room for all of us to hold on round the raft, but with the passing of time our company dwindled still further. One young Marine who had been having a rest out of the water, when asked to come back in off the raft and make room for another, made no reply. We then discovered he had died from exhaustion. Another youngster holding grimly on to

the raft with me told me that now we were into another day it was his birthday … he was all of nineteen years old. Shortly afterwards he drifted away from the raft without a complaint, and none of us remaining had the strength to bring him back. It was as if one had no legs, they were so cold you could not feel them … and your friends whom you had got to know just drowned beside you.

The St. David's lifeboat came through heavy seas to reach a point one and a half miles south of St. Ann's Head at 1.20 a.m. – just over two and a half hours after starting its long passage round the headland. There was a strong smell of oil. The boat began a search and within minutes they heard a shout and sighted something about fifty feet away. On going closer they saw it was a man trying to swim towards them.

Stoker Dryhurst: 'After the craft went down I heard young lads screaming in the water. I was not able to see them, and worst of all I knew some of them were non-swimmers. Gradually the cries got further away. I was being tossed about among wreckage and swallowing diesel oil, and after what seemed like ages I saw a small light flickering. By this time I was very exhausted after going under the waves and being knocked about. I managed to shout for help and eventually I heard voices, someone caught hold of my hands and then I passed out. When I came to I was in between two diesel engines wrapped up in a blanket and duffle coat.'

In the lifeboat after hauling him aboard they had stripped him of his wet clothing, massaged him and made him comfortable. The boat then continued to make a thorough search of the area until daylight, evading a floating horned mine by only a few yards. With no sign of any other survivors the boat then turned and made passage back to St. David's.

But across the sea there was still some life. Sergeant Jetten: 'As the grey light of dawn came into the sky I saw numbly that there were just two of us left clinging to the raft, myself and a young Marine officer. The tide was now drifting us towards the rocks. We were thankful to be so near the shore, but I was worried about whether we would be able to negotiate the rocks after being in the water for so long. However, the rocks were still some way off, and the thought that we still might be seen from a ship or from shore was a cheering one.

'No search ship did come into sight, and as we drifted nearer to a formidable cliff face we kept constant watch on the shore for a search party in hopes that they might be out looking for us. Then a wave came down and washed us both clear of the raft. I lost sight of the officer and decided to take my chances on the rocks. They looked terrifying from where I was. I had no strength left for swimming and let the tide float me in. With the other flotsam I was lifted up and thrown onto the rocks. I was so cold, my whole body numbed, that I never felt any pain. I desperately reached out for a hold but was dragged out to sea again by the tide. I floated further down and was thrown towards a huge rock. Instinctively I put up my arms to protect my head in the collision, but instead the tide lifted my right over the top of the rock and I fell down behind it. Although I was underwater at the time the rock prevented me being washed out to sea again. The next wave pushed me further up the rocks and I hung onto each one as I could. I was completely dazed, but knew the tide was coming in and that I must keep moving in with it.

'Part of all NCOs' uniform was a whistle attached by a leather strap to a button of one's battledress. I was still fully dressed apart from my boots and cap, for which, I found myself thinking, I had a good excuse for discarding, should I be put on a charge for coming ashore improperly dressed. I began blowing my whistle and was rewarded with shouts of "Hang on! Hang on!" coming from the cliff top. As if out of the sky, down came searching soldiers of the Parachute Regiment on their life-lines, and before I could even mutter my feeble thanks they had a rope around me and were busy hoisting me

up the cliff. They were overjoyed, I found, that their presence had been rewarded at last, after witnessing the terrible tragedy the day before when the entire company of our sister craft LCG 15, had been lost while they could only watch helpless from the cliff top.'

The Paratroops had a further reward for their vigilance when they also rescued the Marine officer who had been with Sergeant Jetten on the raft. Luckier than the sergeant, he was washed up on a less rocky part of the shore and was quickly spotted by the searching soldiers.

Sergeant Jetten was rushed to the RAF station at Angle, where the sick quarters staff dressed his badly gashed legs, arms and body, and worked to get his circulation moving again. The effects of the long immersion and exposure had shrunk his body to that of an old man, and the big shock for everyone would come later when they found he was actually 6 ft. 1 in. tall.

'I woke up with a young nurse bending over me saying that I had wet the bed, but was able to explain this away by handing her an empty hot water bottle with the top not fully screwed on. I was now fully thawed out and starting to feel where I had come in contact with the rocks, but the feeling of being alive outweighed any injury I had received.

'The RAF commanding officer visited me during the evening after I awoke and found the village policeman taking a statement. No one knew how the constable had got in but he was full of his own importance, saying it was his duty to get the facts, but the C.O. took his notebook and without reading any of the statement threw it on to the fire. I thought the policeman was going to explode as he changed colour, but before he could say anything he was told that only by the grace of god had he not been arrested by the military police and charged under the Official Secrets Act. At this he accepted that he was not to repeat any of the statement which he had heard – and I was warned to keep my mouth shut and not get up.

'But the next morning I felt good and had no intention of *rigor mortis* setting in, so I slipped out of bed and helped prepare breakfast. Afterwards I was helping to polish the ward floor when the C.O. went past with a dozen or so men. He halted them at my empty bed and it was his turn to explode. "Where the hell has this man gone?" he shouted. The, when he spotted me down the ward, he burst out laughing. It seems he had marched all the men on sick parade into the ward to see me and ask them if *they* had good cause to report sick. He told me he had noticed me on the way down the ward but had not realised who I was. He had no idea that I was over six feet tall, for when they had brought me in I was "the size of a child".'

Over at St. David's, when the lifeboat retuned to its station, two policemen carried Stoker Dryhurst from the boat and Dr. Soar, the lifeboat station secretary, drove Dryhurst to his own home. 'After a hot bath I was put to bed. When I awoke I had a beautiful meal, a whole chicken to myself, and in the afternoon an ambulance came from Milford Haven and I was taken to the hospital in the naval base. I was strapped to my bed for three nights as I was delirious; I thought my hospital bed was the LCG and we were still in the water. I was made to stay in bed, no visitors allowed until after the inquest. I was finally allowed to walk about but in civilian clothes so that no one could stop and question me.'

Just three survivors from two craft. The extent of the tragedy had a profound effect upon the local community. The question began to be asked: why did it happen? Seventy-two officers and men of the two craft had lost their lives together with the six men from *Rosemary's* whaler. Why?

It became the painful duty of Sergeant Jetten, along with the Marine officer survivor, to help identify bodies which had been washed up and bore no identification marks. 'We were able to help with

some of the bodies, but most had received such terrible injuries when dashed against the rocks that their own families could not have identified them. I believe most men died before they reached the rocks, by drowning accelerated by the icy cold of the water, and their bodies were battered against the rocks after death.

'We were not allowed to communicate with our own families until the Admiralty had sent an official telegram, but this was not so bad as we had not been able to write since leaving England and our families were not even aware that we were on the craft when the disaster was reported on the wireless and in the newspapers.'

These heavily censored reports told of two 'naval landing barges' being overwhelmed by fierce seas in a 70 miles an hour gale of the Welsh coast and sinking with only three survivors; the crew of a boat launched from a warship in a rescue attempt had also perished. The reference to 'barges' was a result of the necessary secrecy surrounding the new gun landing craft, but back at Belfast where the rest of the craft were waiting to sail, they knew only too well what the first grim radio communique meant, and to the relief of a good many men who already suspected the true reason for the disaster their sailing orders were cancelled.

Now the sorrowing town of Milford Haven buried the dead. Many of the bereaved families asked for the identified bodies of their menfolk to be sent back for burial in their home towns, but other families travelled to Milford Haven from all parts of the country for the mass funeral. Crowds of people stood bareheaded in the streets as the funeral procession moved along from the public mortuary to the cemetery. Family mourners, parents, sisters and brothers, wives, children and sweethearts of the drowned men lined the open grave, and behind them stood naval, military and RAF officers. Some of the mourners held posies which they dropped sadly into the grave as the Union Jacks were removed from the coffins. The service was shared by the clergy of three churches; there was a naval firing party and an Army bugler sounded The Last Post. The mourners took a farewell look at the grave and then slowly filed away, leaving only the three survivors to pay their last respects to their lost comrades.

There followed an immediate secret Court of Inquiry at which Sergeant Jetten gave a full report of the disaster to LCG 16 and the main cause of it; the deck over the former tank-hold not being extended to the bow, with the result that the craft was flooded and the pumps could not cope. The sequel to this was quickly felt at Belfast, where the crews of all the other waiting LCGs were ordered to accommodation ashore while the craft were finished off with a complete upper deck before being allowed to proceed to sea.

At Portsmouth later Sergeant Jetten received the personal thanks of the First Lord of the Admiralty (Mr. A. V. Alexander) for the clarity of his report. That was the official side. The other side had come when the sergeant's wife saw him for the first time after the disaster. He looked prematurely old and haggard and had his few belongings wrapped up in a brown paper parcel. Or a long time afterwards Sergeant Jetten suffered from nightmares and kept reliving the experience and thinking about his lost shipmates.

At Ilford Haven too, where the stark reminder of the tragedy was a common grave with thirty-nine gravestones, they could not forget the disaster. The very strong feeling was that men should never have been sent out in those craft in such stormy conditions, and that the boat from *Rosemary* should never have been lowered in such seas, this latter feeling apparently being shared by some of her officers who had walked off the sloop when she returned to Milford Haven harbour. The demand for a public inquiry grew.

The upshot was a question put in the House of Commons by an M.P., Mr C. G. Ammon, who asked the First Lord of the Admiralty 'Whether he has any statement to make concerning the sinking of two barges off the coast of Wales and the consequent loss of the lives of a number of soldiers.' Six weeks after the tragedy the First Lord gave his reply in the Commons.

'There is no question of the disaster being due to negligence' he said. 'The fundamental cause of the Milford Haven tragedy was that the weather changed suddenly in spite of favourable forecasts … The vessel were sailed in good weather and with prospects favourable but unhappily the weather, after a sudden change, deteriorated with a rapidity unusual even for St. George's Channel The commanding officers decided nevertheless that they could make Milford Haven.' When they arrived off the Haven 'conditions were severe with a full gale blowing on shore and with a heavy and confused sea. FOIC Milford Haven at once took steps to secure that every possible attempt was made to bring these craft safely in to harbour. …' The six men from Rosemary had been lost 'in a courageous rescue attempt'.

Mr Ammon said it was alleged in the neighbourhood that the accident could have been prevented had the officers on the spot had the authority to cancel the instructions. The First Lord replied: 'There is no word of truth in any suggestion of that kind. The commanding officers had full instructions what to do in certain circumstances and the Flag Officer on the spot took every possible step.' When another M.P. asked the leading question, 'Is the First Lord satisfied that these craft are correctly designed and seaworthy?' the reply was: 'They are extremely good craft for their purpose and they have made very long voyages.'

But it was common knowledge to those concerned that prior to the tragedy the LCGs had not made any voyages at all.

The statement was regarded by many as unsatisfactory. The prime cause of the disaster – the incomplete decks, was known only to the Admiralty and the LCG men and for security reasons could not be made public (though the defect was admitted later in an Admiralty staff monograph), but the still bitter local feeling was that the two craft should not have been allowed to sail on in such weather, which had not turned quite as suddenly as implied.

The information of Second Coxswain David J. Lewis of the St. David's lifeboat, which had been supplied with all the naval messages, was that the commanders of the two craft had twice sought shelter. 'On approaching Fishguard they signalled for permission to shelter as the weather was deteriorating with westerly winds. They were ordered to carry on their passage. On reaching the approaches to Milford Haven they again asked for permission to shelter, as now a west south-west gale was blowing. They were again told to carry on their passage.'

There was also the apparent misunderstanding over the non-availability of the Angle lifeboat and the delay in calling out the St. David's boat. Coxswain Lewis: 'If we had been called out sooner we could have been at the position before dark and definitely would have had more than one survivor.' Many questions remained unanswered.

Placing the blame is not the aim of the authors and certainly not the wish of the survivors; but a frank account of this tragic episode in the history of the lading craft needed to be given. From these disastrous beginnings the LCGs went on to sail thousands of miles doing sterling work in the role for which they had been created. The sister craft of LCGs 15 and16, after being refitted with complete decks, sailed without incident from Belfast to Falmouth, where they received orders to continue to Gibraltar; and from there, eventually, to the Sicily landings.

This is an extract from the excellent book 'War off the Landing Craft' by Paul Lund, and Harry Ludlam, 1976. W Foulsham & Co Ltd; 1st Edition edition (5 Feb. 1976).

Permission has been sought numerous times, with no response since 2012.