

Women to the rescue!

In the most extreme conditions, on land and at sea, women are out there saving lives. **Caroline Roberts** meets three female rescue volunteers

THE LIFEBOAT SKIPPER

1 Despite the heroics of Grace Darling, the 17-year-old lighthouse keeper's daughter who braved angry seas in a rowing boat to rescue shipwreck survivors back in 1838, it took many years before women were allowed to serve alongside men on lifeboats. When Aileen Jones wanted to join the Porthcawl Lifeboat at 17, the station wasn't accepting women. But at the age of 30, she became its first female crew member.

It's one of a number of firsts for Aileen: she became the boat's first female helm, one of the RNLI's first women with the authority to launch a boat, and, in 2004, was the first female crew member to receive an RNLI gallantry award – the Bronze Medal – for saving two lives in a dramatic rescue.

'It was blowing a Force 8 gale and the skipper of a fishing boat was screaming down the radio for assistance. He had engine trouble and was drifting towards a sandbank, and his only crewman had broken his arm. I was the first helm to arrive at the station, so I drove the boat. The swell was building up and there were some huge waves, so it was pretty hairy.' Despite the conditions, they got a line on board and towed the vessel to safety. 'I knew we were on the edge of our capabilities, but I wasn't scared – the adrenaline keeps you going.'

By the time Aileen joined the crew, she was a mother of two and her husband was also a member. 'We made a decision to only go on "shouts" together if the weather was calm,' she says. Luckily, her parents live nearby, so they were able to take

over childcare at short notice. The lifeboat has turned out to be quite a family affair – both her son and daughter grew up to become crew members, as have her nephews, and her sister is a volunteer coastguard.

She has now stepped down from the crew, but she's still regularly called out to authorise launches – the station can respond to up to 80 shouts a year. But they don't all involve humans in danger. 'We do a lot of dog rescues, as people may go into the water to save their pet

‘We coaxed a beached baby dolphin back into the water, where its mother was waiting



Driving the lifeboat through the surf

and put their own lives at risk. And recently, we coaxed a beached baby dolphin back into the water, where its mother was waiting.'

Last year, there was one call that took Aileen completely by surprise, when she learned that her long service was to be recognised with an MBE. 'I was really shocked,' she says. 'It's a huge honour.' As is often the case with heroes, she doesn't want to take all the credit. 'I've never been on the boat on my own. The award is for the rest of the crew, too, and all the other supporters.'



Aileen with her nephew, Bee, who is also a crew member



Volunteer dog handler Christyne with her Border collie, Bute

THE SEARCH DOG HANDLER

2 It was New Year's Day and Christyne Judge had just fallen into bed, exhausted from a long drive, when her pager went off. 'The weather was horrendous. I just wanted to put my head back down. But then I thought: I can't lie here in a nice, warm bed when someone's out there lost on the fells in the snow.'

As a volunteer dog handler with the Lake District Search and Mountain Rescue Association, Christyne can be called out at any time. 'Most of our searches are at night and in poor

weather,' she says. 'You can be in the middle of nowhere, in extreme cold, dense fog and 70mph winds. And dog handlers often work alone. You might need to bed down on the fellside and start searching again in the morning.'

But her faithful Border collie, Bute, is never far away. 'She loves the job. At home, she's a calm little girl who likes to play and be stroked, but outside, she's different. She's very confident and wants to be in the thick of it all.'

Christyne began 'bodying' – hiding on the fells to help with search dog training – in 1998, and was soon

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training her first puppy. It's 'a bit like Lassie', she explains. A dog can pick up an airborne scent from 400 metres, and will indicate by barking and running backwards and forwards between the handler and the find. It takes at least two years to train a dog but, says Christyne, 'If that dog only ever rescues one person, it's worth it.'

Rescue volunteers often need to make sacrifices when it comes to work and time with family, but the former police officer now runs her own dog-grooming business and customers are understanding when she has to cancel at short notice. 'My partner does worry sometimes if the forecast is really bad,' she adds, 'but now he's started bodying, so he's involved, too.'

As for the man Christyne helped search for at New Year, he was found, very cold – but alive. 'To rescue someone who wouldn't have survived the night is really rewarding. That's what you go through all that training for – to save lives.'



Taking a rest on a Scottish avalanche training course

THE RESCUE VOLUNTEER

3 Mountain rescue teams don't just operate among the country's highest elevations. Emily Thompson combines her day job at an environmental charity with volunteering for The Holme Valley Mountain Rescue Team in the Peak District. Much of the team's work involves helping the emergency services access walkers, mountain bikers or hang-gliders who've been injured in remote areas. But it also plays an important role in police searches for missing people. Due to funding cuts, forces now have far fewer specialist

search officers, and mountain rescue can provide vital expertise, she explains.

'We use a lot of data from previous searches, as well as national data about where people tend to go when they disappear. It often depends on their age and their mental and physical health. We also know the most methodical way of searching terrains.'

Searches have both happy and distressing endings, but there's nothing worse for families than

someone never being found. 'Last year, we were searching for a man in his 90s. He was a fit walker who regularly went out alone. Sadly, he'd had a heart attack and was dead when we found him. That can be hard for the team. Even if we can't save someone, we're making a difference.'

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