

**Commissioner Eamonn Doherty and Air Sea Rescue  
Address by Chris Reynolds, Director of Irish Coast Guard  
Ireland Medal Ceremony in the Garda College**



**Chris Reynolds with members of the Doherty family**

**Commissioner, Honoured guests, Ladies and gentlemen. I would like to put Commissioner Doherty's work in some perspective. My first major search and rescue event happened exactly 30 years ago next Tuesday at 8 in the morning. I was a young navy sub-lieutenant on watch on the LE Aisling off our west coast when an Air India Flight 182 from Montreal was blown up almost literally overhead. Many here no doubt remember the loss of 330 lives but one of my clearest memories were, that as on scene commander we couldn't talk to the Marine Rescue Coordination Centre, the MRCC, in Shannon directly because it had no marine radios and all the helicopters to recover the victims from the water were all from the UK courtesy of both the RAF and RN. From a SAR point of view Ireland was in a bad state of affairs and it was only going to get worse.**

Three years later on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1988 John Oglesby lost his leg on a trawler off the North West coast and slowly bled to death for the want of a SAR helicopter. The people of the west coast had had enough and campaigned for change under the banner of the West Coast SAR Action Committee.

I first met Commissioner Eamon Doherty, known commonly as Doc, in 1990 bouncing around in a little rubber boat on our west coast, trying to get him and a few others onto an offshore lighthouse. He was leading the Review group on Air Sea Rescue in Ireland which had been set up by Minister Wilson. The question of reviews, committees and reports, as we all know, is 'will anything actually be done' or will it just sit on some departmental shelf gathering dust.

Eamonn didn't underestimate the resistance to change that he faced, in effectively demilitarising SAR decades ahead of other European countries and in creating a new single entity to deliver on a national maritime emergency service. As my mother used to always tell me 'if you are going to be born small you better be born smart'. Now Eamon wasn't born small, he was a big man and pugilist, but he knew he had to make the initial change seem small and unthreatening, and to then follow on with a sucker punch. Here is the actual 1990 Doherty Report on air Sea Rescue; please let me read to you from its interim recommendations.

Although there was one big interim item on a helicopter for Shannon that couldn't be avoided the interim report gave no clue for what Eamonn put in the final recommendations. And this report did indeed fundamentally change search and

rescue for ever in Ireland. The report led to the creation of the modern Coast Guard, the report led to the acquisition of modern large helicopters that can reach out into the dark Atlantic on the stormiest of nights; the report led to many more lifeboat stations on our west coast; and there were many more changes – in fact 54 recommendations. There were later reviews but none had such an impact as the Doherty Report. Ireland now has a Coast Guard service that is a mix of full time professional mariners, contracted helicopters and crew and thousands of volunteers; not just Coast Guard but the RNLi and CRBI, and although I might seem rather biased coming from me, but I believe Ireland now has an coastal and maritime emergency response system that is the envy of our European partners.

I never was in Eamonns company again until I attended his funeral in Mount Argus in 2010. Shakespeare wrote ‘that the good men do is oft interred with their bones’ – not so for Eamonn Doherty; the Doc made good things happen. I hope his family find comfort in the certain fact that there are many men and women walking around Ireland that owe their lives to Eamonns insight and perseverance. And so it is in the names of all those lives which have been saved that we honour Commissioner Doherty today.

**END**