

## JOHN CONNOLLY ADDRESS AT IRELAND MEDAL CEREMONY NEW ROSS BOAT CLUB - 10<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2015

Honoured Guests,

It is time to talk about the Ireland Medal. As we have come to the end of the first chapter of the Ireland Medal story I thought I might explain how we got to where we are.

Back in 2003, when the idea of the Ireland Medal was first discussed as a part of the Royal Life Saving Society Ireland's centenary celebrations, it was clearly understood by those present that the medal would be awarded to members of the public for outstanding swimming rescues of persons who were drowning. It was only as an afterthought, a just in case the possibility ever arose that there might not be a suitable rescue recipient, that it was agreed that the medal might also be awarded to an organisation whose members had collectively carried out numerous swimming rescues, or to individuals as a sort of lifesaving lifetime achievement award - but the original primary aim was to award it for swimming rescues by members of the public. A stock of medals was commissioned and when they arrived the problem began. What problem? The rescue problem.

To explain the rescue problem I first need to explain some little known things about the rescue of persons who are drowning. The most effective swimming rescuers of persons drowning are properly trained lifeguards for these reasons; Lifeguards are fit, Lifeguards are strong swimmers, Lifeguards are trained lifesavers, Lifeguards wear light clothing, Lifeguards have suitable rescue equipment which they know how to use and have trained with, Lifeguards usually work as part of a team, Lifeguards know the water they are swimming in, Lifeguards are sober, Lifeguards are usually not related to or are not close friends of those they rescue, Lifeguards are trained in aftercare such as CPR and first aid.

When it comes to swimming rescues carried out by members of the public very often some of the features of lifeguard rescues are missing and sometimes a lot of the features are missing. Rescuers for example may not be fit, may not be good swimmers, may be alone, may not be sober, may not have rescue equipment to hand, and when rescue equipment is available they may not know how to use it. It is important to understand that courage is not in question here. Rather it is the rescuer's judgement and actions which may be questionable but it is their courage that is rewarded - their courage that results in the awarding of a rescue medal. When it comes to receiving awards for the rescue of drowning persons the courage displayed by a rescuer and the level of danger inherent in a drowning situation are often the factors which determine whether or not a medal is awarded and whether that medal is bronze, silver or gold. Because a swimming rescue is more likely to result in a rescue award than an undramatic and safer land-based rescue it is swimming rescues that are publicised in newspapers - twice - when the rescue happens and again after award ceremonies. This double serving of publicity may lead members of the public to believe that entering water and

making a swimming rescue is the best rescue option, when in fact, for untrained members of the public, a swimming rescue is the worst rescue option - the most dangerous option. In Ireland every year between 2 and 6 swimming rescuers drown while attempting a rescue.

Back in 2003 we could easily have created a marking or comparison matrix, awarding points for different aspects of a rescue to rank rescue attempts in order of difficulty, but this would not take the RS Factor into account and often the RS factor is a major determinant in how difficult and how dangerous a rescue is. What is the RS Factor? It has different names in different places and is not spoken about much in public because RS stands for Rescuer Stupidity. The RS Factor can turn a simple low risk land-based rescue into a very dangerous and complicated swimming rescue. Let me give you an example - two young men are messing about close to a river; one falls in and starts to drown. At the very start of the incident the person drowning is close to the river's edge and all the rescuer needs to do is remove his coat, lie down flat, and throw a sleeve of the coat to the casualty to grab hold of. The drowning casualty is then pulled to safety and helped out of the river. Wet and shaken they head for home and a change of clothing and may not mention the incident at all to avoid unwanted questions. Instead of this almost hidden rescue the RS factor kicks in and the second youth jumps into the river to save his friend. Both are quickly moved out into the middle of the river where one youth grabs hold of the other and a great struggle commences. During this time they are observed by a boatman who uses his boat to rescue them. Newspaper headlines the next day might read YOUNG MAN RISKS HIS LIFE IN TITANIC STRUGGLE TO SAVE DROWNING FRIEND and he might even get a medal in recognition of his courage with no mention of the RS Factor. Often when rescues are subjected to deep analysis the RS Factor quickly becomes apparent but is frequently overlooked or even ignored in favour of the courage displayed and the opportunity of a good publicity event. This was the rescue problem we were faced with in 2003. If we were to promote one particular rescue as being of exceptional merit it had to be one that would stand up to very detailed scrutiny, with no hint of the RS Factor and we were struggling to find one.

The awarding of the first medal was to be the opening event in the RLSS IRELAND Centenary celebrations. The then Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern was booked for Government Building in early February 2004 and we had to announce a medal recipient in late 2003. Under time pressure we folded and went for option number 2 - an organisation whose members collectively performed many swimming rescues - and we gave it to An Garda Síochána. I have been researching Garda rescues for years; serving police officers perform at least 20 swimming rescues annually and since 1922 have rescued over 2000 from drowning, so it was a well deserved honour. We rationalised that we would have more time to devote to finding a suitable rescue for the second medal, the



*Sr. Julie (centre), John D. Walsh (grandson of James Hogan - (extreme right) and members of the extended Hogan family in St. Mary's Church, New Ross, Co. Wexford for the laying of wreath by Lifesaving foundation Chairperson, Brendan Donohoe on the graves of lifesaving brothers Thomas and James Hogan. Also present were RLSS Ireland President, Edward Duffy (with chain) and Councillor Larry O'Brien, MCC. (far left).*



2004 medal – and yes we fell into the publicity trap realising that the Garda Press Office would promote the award for Garda purposes – which they did – and the medal was launched with national publicity.

The 2004 RLSS IRELAND centenary celebrations started with the first Ireland Medal presentation and ended with a one-day seminar on drowning survival at sea conducted by Surgeon Admiral Frank Golden (who had just retired as the Royal Navy's senior doctor and was then the RNLI's chief medical advisor). Frank and his colleague Professor Michael Tipton had just published their major ground-breaking book *Essentials of Sea Survival* – a book that took all of the beliefs held about how to survive a sinking at sea and subjected them to scientific analysis determining what works and what is just myth. Late in 2004 we learned, that underneath all of his many honours and awards, Frank Golden was a proud Corkman. We decided that it was too great an opportunity to miss to present him with the second Ireland Medal while he was in Ireland. Yes, once again, we had fallen into the publicity opportunity trap but our motives were pure in that we genuinely wanted to recognise the contribution made by Frank Golden to saving lives from drowning. Such was Frank's status that the medal was presented to him by the Commodore of the Irish Navy, Ireland's senior naval officer. Frank became a very good friend of mine and he knew what we were doing but he was happy to be associated with the Foundation and attended two Ireland Medal functions afterwards. As we introduce a new medal I find it interesting that whilst the 2004 medal was presented by the Commodore of the Irish Navy because of the status of the medal recipient – the 2013 medal was presented by the current Irish Chief of Staff Vice-Admiral Mark Mellett to American academic Professor Stephen Langendorfer due to the status of the medal itself. We have come a long way in 10 years.

We had now presented two medals – the 2003 and 2004 medals – but neither for a swimming rescue. We had realised that we could generate good publicity for specific aspects of drowning prevention and rescue by awarding the medal to organisations and individuals without our having to negotiate the RS Factor minefield of unwise swimming rescues. It was decided to continue as we had started and to abandon the swimming rescue criteria for receipt of the medal. I remember jokingly justifying it to the RLSS IRELAND Management Board and to the Lifesaving Foundation Board of Directors on the grounds that God had guided us down a better pathway than that originally planned by us mere humans. A quick rundown of some medal recipients illustrates the topics publicised;

The 2005 medal was awarded to Australian world leading paediatrician John Pearn for his promotion of child drowning safety. Statistically one child drowns somewhere worldwide every 30-40 seconds. Drowning is the biggest single accidental killer of children worldwide. In Ireland a child drowns every 6 – 8 weeks but in Bangladesh 50 children drown every day. Foyle Search and Rescue's receipt of the 2007 medal highlighted the crucial role of Community Lifeboats and community action in reducing drowning numbers and also highlighted the fact that while Ireland has a major suicide by drowning problem we also have very successful community based prevention and rescue strategies.

The 2009 medal was awarded to Dublin Fire Brigade who rescue over 100 persons from drowning in the River Liffey every year. A little known fact is that many fire stations in Ireland close to rivers now have water rescue capabilities and that fire fighters rescue more persons from drowning than they do from fires.\* Next to lifeguards fire fighters are the biggest identifiable rescuers of drowning persons in Ireland. I could go on about each medal recipient but will not. By 2009 the Ireland Medal had become a major international lifesaving honour.

By 2014 the Foundation was running out of medals and needed to either re-order a stock of the original medal or commission a completely new medal. The name of the charity had been changed from The Irish Lifesaving Foundation to The Lifesaving Foundation in recognition of the international spread of its membership (15 countries) and there had been a breaking of the original connection with the Royal Life Saving Society. The Lifesaving Foundation is a totally independent charity. It was decided to commission a new medal but to keep much of what was identifiable about the original medal. Finding a sponsor was a problem however as we did not want a commercial sponsor – we didn't want The Three Ireland Medal or The Aviva Ireland Medal.

Late last year I received an invitation from John Walsh to represent the Foundation at a mass in New Ross commemorating deceased members of the Hogan family. John mentioned that his family historically had a lifesaving connection and I put it in my diary with a note to myself that I would attend the mass - if I had nothing else on that day. In December John asked me to speak after the mass about his ancestor's lifesaving



*Cathaoirleach (Mayor) Michael Sheehan (New Ross Municipal Borough) and Lifesaving Foundation Chairperson Brendan Donohoe presenting sample copies of the new Ireland Medal to John D. Walsh and Tom Hogan representing the wider Hogan family.*

exploits sending me some news cuttings by way of background information. Reading the news cuttings I was intrigued by two of the Hogan brothers, Thomas and James, who had collectively rescued about 50 persons from drowning. I was especially intrigued by the younger brother Jimmy, who had rescued so many from the River Barrow as it flows through New Ross – all swimming rescues. I sent John some Foundation documents and to my surprise he quickly followed up with an inquiry as to whether his grandfather Jimmy was eligible for receipt of the Ireland Medal posthumously. I replied that he was not as all nominees have to be alive at the time of their nomination but the idea would not go away. Maybe it was guilt at our abandoning the swimming rescue criteria so quickly because had they been living nominees we would definitely have considered both Thomas and James as recipients for the medal and we might even have seen an extra publicity opportunity in making a joint presentation to both of them.

I spoke about our actions being guided and maybe they are because the voice inside my head that said we cannot award a single medal to a dead lifesaver suddenly changed its message and said we cannot inscribe Jimmy Hogan's name on one medal but we could inscribe it on all of the new medals as part of a sponsorship arrangement with the Hogan family. I spoke to John about the family sponsoring the new medal and in words used in the Gospels "so it came to pass" that the Ireland Medal had a new sponsor. I would like to thank Conor Phelan especially for his generosity. The Foundation had received a sample of the new medal from the manufacturer and, using this as a sign, the Board of Directors decided to present two sample medals to the Hogan family - one for

Thomas and one for Jimmy - in special recognition of their lifesaving achievements. Only Jimmy's name is inscribed on the reverse of the new medals. And here we are today marking the introduction of a new version of the Ireland Medal and recognising the contribution to saving lives from drowning by two exceptional lifesavers. Thank you for joining us.

John Connolly (10th October 2015)

[john@lifesavingfoundation.ie](mailto:john@lifesavingfoundation.ie)

[thelifesavingfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:thelifesavingfoundation@gmail.com)

[www.lifesavingfoundation.ie](http://www.lifesavingfoundation.ie)



*In memory of brothers  
Thomas & James Hogan  
Exceptional Lifesavers - 10th October, 2015  
The Lifesaving Foundation*

#### **\*Woman is rescued from the Shannon**

**FIREMEN** specifically trained in water rescue have saved a woman from drowning in the latest in a string of emergency operations along the River Shannon in Limerick city.

The woman entered the water at the canal bank off Clare Street, shortly before 10.30 p.m. on Friday. The canal runs onto the river at nearby Lock Quay.

"At approximately 22.30 a call came into Limerick City Fire and Rescue Service that a woman had fallen into the old canal on Clare Street. Three units were immediately dispatched to the scene," said a source.

"On arrival, a young woman was seen in the water. Firefighters wearing specialist swift water rescue equipment entered the water and removed the woman from the water," the source said, adding: "She was handed over to a waiting ambulance."

The woman was treated by HSE paramedics at the scene before being transferred to University Hospital Limerick for treatment.

Sunday Independent 11 October 2015

