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HIGH WIRE HERO

Despite being hurt himself when he was smashed against a ship's rail, coast-guard helicopter winchman Chris Murray continued his heroic task until he had plucked six Dutch salvage experts off a ship being thrown about in gigantic 40ft waves.

The survivors later paid tribute to "the heroes from Stornoway" who arrived in the rescue helicopter as mountainous seas threatened to sink their crippled



Chris Murray.

transport ship which was under tow off Barra.

The six men had to call for help as the Elektron, which ran aground on St Kilda three weeks ago, was being towed to Liverpool and hit mountainous seas.

The 1,600-tonne heavy transport ship was under tow on passage from St Kilda, where she was refloated after 12 days aground on Friday night, to Liverpool by the Russian tug Tamcha.

Earlier, Dutch salvage experts Smit Tak used a 200ft

barge and the powerful Tamcha to drag the holed Elektron off the Village Bay foreshore on St Kilda where she was blown during unloading early on October 15. Tanks with airlocks had been set up around the holes in her hull to keep her afloat until proper repairs could be done.

Despite a bad weather forecast, the salvage team from Dutch specialists Smit Tak set sail in the ship under tow on Saturday morning. However, conditions worsened even further and

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GALBRAITH SAYS NO TO LINGERBAY

The Comhairle announced on Friday that their stance in opposing the Lingerbay superquarry has been "vindicated".

Scottish Executive Minister Sam galbraith has made his decision, and that decision is "no". This comes shortly after MP Calum Macdonald had urged

new environment minister Sam Galbraith to make a speedy decision on the Harris superquarry. The MP asked the minister to

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Cllr. Donald Maclean Chairman of the Development Services Committee who made the statement.

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Force 10 to Force 12 severe storm force winds and gigantic waves began to threaten the safety of the ship.

As trucks and other heavy equipment began to break free from lashings and rolled around the deck, Wytse Huismans, salvage master with Dutch salvors Smit Tak who had command of the ship, feared sensitive pressure valves on air tanks which had been set up because of the vessel's ruptured hull could be damaged.

Mr Huismans said: "If that happened, the level of the sea water would rise quickly and the vessel would sink. You would not believe the size of the waves coming down on us - up to 40 feet anyway.

"We had to turn south-west-erly to go into the waves or we would be in trouble.

"Also, if the tow rope with the tug had snapped, we would be cast adrift at the sea's mercy. I realised then that I could not assure the safety of the ship or my men and asked for a helicopter rescue."

The coastguard rescue helicopter, captained by John Bentley, took two and a half hours, twice the usual flying time to reach the scene, 30 miles south-west of Barra Head, from Stornoway battling against the storm force winds.

He and co-pilot John McIntyre battled in the roughest conditions that most of the aircrew had ever experienced to hold the large Sikorsky S61N helicopter steady over the Elektron in the storm as winch operator Tab Hunter repeatedly tried to lower winchman Chris Murray down onto the deck.

Recovering at a Stornoway hotel, Wytse Huismans said: "I do not know how these guys did it. The deck was heaving up to 40 feet and the winchman would be almost on deck and he would then be yanked up into the air."

At one stage, just after one

of the large trucks on board broke its lashing and somersaulted over the side of the ship into the ocean, Chris Murray was thrown against the ship's railings and suffered whiplash injuries.

Despite the pain in his neck and shoulders, the former Royal Navy diver, who is originally from Dornoch, continued with the operation to winch the six men of the lurching ship.

Mr Huismann said that the engine room of the Elektron was flooded and all hydraulics on the ship had ceased to function.

"Any loss of pressure on the air valves, and she will begin to sink."

He said that Captain Bentley and his crew on "Rescue Mike Uniform", the callsign of the Stornoway-based coastguard helicopter, had performed a heroic task.

"These men in that helicopter are heroes - they are like angels who came from the skies to rescue us. They said they had never come across conditions like that before but they put their own lives in danger to save us.

"We can never thank them enough."

It emerged that winchman Chris Murray had to see a doctor for his whiplash injuries after being thrown against the ship's railings.

A friend said: "Chris is very sore and the doctor has told him that he may suffer severe stiffness and may have to go off work. But he is bright and cheerful and happy that all the men were rescued."

The gales eased after the crew were taken off the Elektron.

The charter vessel, which is owned by Statnett Entreprenor SA, part of the Norwegian power giant Statnett which runs that country's national power grid, kept on under tow for Merseyside.

The following day, the salvage experts who were airlifted off the Elektron saved her from

sinking in the nick of time. As she began to take water and list badly off Northern Ireland, the six Dutch salvage experts who were winched off the crippled ship early off Barra after she was threatened by 40ft waves, were airlifted back onto the jinxed vessel.

She had begun to list by 20 degrees and coastguards at Greenock were told the level had reached the crew's accommodation area before the Smit Tak salvage team reached with pumps.

Meanwhile our local hero, coastguard helicopter winchman Chris Murray, who suffered whiplash injuries during the rescue of the six men, was said to be much better.

Not The First Time

It takes guts and skill to be a rescue helicopter winchman and Chris Murray has both. This was not the first time he has had a close shave.

Chris was catapulted overboard into mountainous Atlantic waves from a Spanish trawler as he dropped in to aid a sick crewman about six years ago.

The helicopter crew then had to search for him and fish him out after "a huge lump of sea" hit the 27-metre trawler Maraimé just as Chris unhooked his lifeline.

But despite the pain wracking his own body, Chris signalled to anxious winch operator Vic Carcass that he was going onto the trawler again.

He succeeded in getting the casualty, with a suspected perforated ulcer, winched up and the helicopter dashed the 240 miles back to Stornoway from the scene, 80 miles off Rockall.

Chief pilot Alan Elphinstone said at the time: "Chris knew that the helicopter could only stay there for a few minutes as fuel was getting low."

Despite nursing a dislocated finger and bad bruising on his legs, ribs and backside, Chris in-

sisted on going back to work the following afternoon.

Galbraith says no to Lingerbay

(from front page)

swot up quickly on the evidence after what Lord Hardie at the Court of Session recently condemned as the Government's "scandalous" delay in coming to a decision on the plan.

In a statement, Mr Macdonald, a former transport minister, referred to "the sorry saga" that had dragged on for far too long and that a conclusion must be sought and accepted.

The Comhairle are happy about the decision, because it has removed the "uncertainty" they say.

The Comhairle released the following statement on Friday: "*Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has today acknowledged the long awaited decision from the Scottish Executive to refuse the proposed superquarry at Lingerbay in South Harris.*

Mr. Donald Maclean, Chairman of the Development Services Committee, said: "At long last the Scottish Executive has made its decision and removed the uncertainty which has hung over the island since the planning application was submitted back in 1991, The Comhairle's policy has been to oppose this development and we support the decision to refuse planning consent. The decision has vindicated the Comhairle's stance against this development in an area of such outstanding natural beauty."

Mr. Maclean went on to say, "It is now essential that the Comhairle works closely with the local enterprise company, Harris Development Ltd. and