

10-25-1997 – Mayo Co Ireland - Michael Heffernan –Vol PSD – Rescue Attempt

## Two die and three saved after Mayo family trapped in sea cave

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/two-die-and-three-saved-after-mayo-family-trapped-in-sea-cave-1.119717>

Oct 27, 1997 FRANK KILFEATHER

Two men died and a family of three were pulled to safety in a dramatic rescue in rough seas at Horse Island off the north Co Mayo coast at the weekend.

The dead were Mr Michael Heffernan (38), an experienced local diver, who was founder and training officer with the Grainne Uaile diving and rescue club in Ballina, Co Galway, and Mr Will Ernest von Bellow (53), a retired German businessman who lived nearby at Belderrig, near Ballycastle.

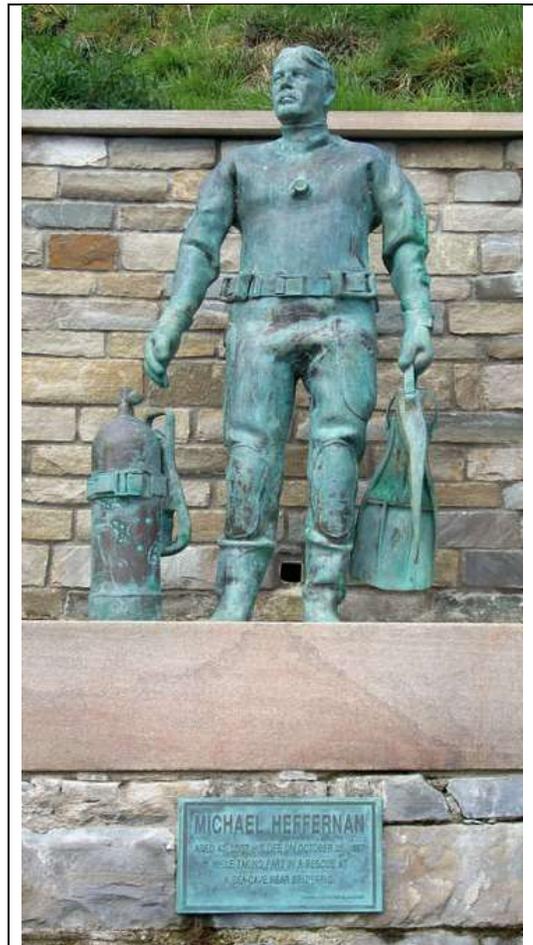
Mr Bellow brought locals Tony Murphy, his wife, Carmel, and their daughter, Emer (13), out in his new 16-foot currach for a pleasure trip at 11 a.m. on Saturday.

They were exploring the caves at Horse Island, which are at sea level, when their boat got into trouble.

They succeeded in getting to a large cave at the bottom of the cliffs where they were trapped by the high water level.

When they failed to return, the alarm was raised at 5.30 p.m. and the rescue services were called in. They were located by local fishermen, who had started the search and raised the alarm.

Supt Tony McNamara, of Belmullet, who is also cox of the Ballyglass lifeboat, called for the assistance of the Garda Sub-aqua unit based in Dublin. The five-man unit was rushed to the area from Dublin Airport by the marine rescue helicopter.



**Michael Heffernan.**

**Memorial overlooking Lacken pier.**

**Michael Heffernan aged 40, a member of Grainne Uaile sub aqua club lost his life on 25th October 1997. He was taking part in the rescue of the crew of a currach who had become trapped in a sea cave near Belderrig on the North Mayo coast. One member of the currach crew also perished.**

Local divers made an effort to reach the stranded family, but Mr Heffernan was hurled against rocks by high seas and died. It is understood Mr Bellow died in the cave.

Other members of the Grainne Uaile club heard of the news while on a diving holiday in Malta. Mr Heffernan did not travel as his wife, Ann Marie, is expecting their second child. The club members are making arrangements to fly home immediately.

The search operation, working under helicopter lights in rising winds among knife-edged rocks, and involving lifeboats and local boatmen, made a breakthrough at 9 p.m. on Saturday night when shouts and whistles were heard.

The noise was traced to a tideline-level cave on the small islet, known as Horse Island, where the group was believed to have safely sought shelter.

The rescued Murphy family were brought to Sligo hospital where they were stated to be suffering from hypothermia, but were "comfortable" after their ordeal.

Rescuers described the conditions as atrocious, with waves of up to 12 feet smashing into the cave and making it extremely difficult to get the family to safety. They had got themselves into a crevice at the back of the cave, one metre above the water level.

Father Sean Killeen, Ballycastle parish priest, said people prayed at the scene in an all-night vigil. There was terrible sadness that two people should lose their lives like this. He said: "I don't know how to describe it. There was a feeling of terrible shock - and relief. Relief that one of our young families, Tony, Carmel and little Eimear, were saved, miraculously saved. We couldn't believe it. We were all here all night, waiting and wondering. And then there was the terrible price that we had to pay - the loss of two people's lives."

## **Tragedy framed in heroism**

[HTTP://WWW.INDEPENDENT.IE/IRISH-NEWS/TRAGEDY-FRAMED-IN-HEROISM-26200465.HTML](http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/tragedy-framed-in-heroism-26200465.html)

04/12/1997

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The Murphy family of Belderrig More, Ballina, clung to each other after their friend who owned the currach, and a diver sent to help them, drowned on October 25 last.

The Mayo coroner, Dr Mick Loftus described the deaths of German national, Will Ernst von Below (53) from Belderrig, Co Mayo, and diver Michael Heffernan (40), Belderrig, at Horse Island off the Mayo coast, as a double tragedy framed in heroism.

The inquests into the drownings were told the German national, Will Ernst von Below, who resided at Belderrig, died when his new currach capsized in a sea cave at Horse Island, throwing his friends, Mr Tony Murphy, his wife Carmel, and their 11-year-old daughter Emma into the sea.

Mr Michael Heffernan, Training Officer with the Ballina-based Grainne Uaile sub aqua club, also drowned when he went to their assistance.

### **WALL OF WATER**

Mr Murphy told the court Mr von Below, a close family friend, had invited them all on the sea journey in his new currach and was showing them the scenery and explaining the geography and geology of the rock structures within the cave.

`` I heard a very loud, rumbling noise which began to get louder and louder. I glanced around and saw a wall of water at least 15 feet high approach the stern of the boat from the mouth of the cave. Mr von Below opened the engine to its full power but the wave hit us and swamped the boat. I was fired out."

Mr Murphy told how he thought he was going to drown.

`` The water was deep and the waves kept pounding me. My wellingtons kept weighing me down and after a struggle I managed to get them off.

After 15 to 20 minutes in the water I thought for sure I was going to drown. I saw Will von Below within 15 feet of me. He was alive and calling I waded on to a beach at the back of the cave and joined my daughter," he said.

Mr Murphy added: `` We called and called for Will until we were hoarse. We got no reply. The tide at this stage was rising and I realised I would have to move my family to higher ground at the rear of the cave or else we would be caught in the big waves which were crashing in around us and washed out and be lost".

The witness said he built a buffer with rocks and boulders at the back of the cave for shelter. Mr von Below's body was washed up against some rocks and he secured it with stones to stop it being washed out.

Before daylight disappeared Mr Murphy said he saw the lights of a helicopter flashing on the bay outside and this gave them courage.

`` I realised that the alarm was raised and people knew we were missing. We decided that at this stage all we could do was to huddle up and wait it out to be rescued."

## **HORRIFIC**

Garda Ciaran Doyle, Garda Underwater Unit, Santry, said the water conditions were horrific during the rescue operation. They succeeded in bringing in an inflatable to the trapped family.

The Coroner said Michael Heffernan's practical heroism should be marked and honoured nationally and locally in some notable and tangible way. Praising all those who took part in the rescue of the trapped Murphy family, Dr Loftus singled out the diver who had ventured into the dark, heavy swell of the cave.

`` He had experienced a double sorrow from deaths within his own family circle. He had foregone a diving holiday with his companions in Malta to be at home with his wife Anne Marie for the birth of their expected second child in January'', he commented.

He said the real meaning and magnitude of Michael's bravery would remain as a consoling light.

## **THE CRUEL SEA; DIVER MICHAEL: unsung hero who died trying to save family washed up at the back of a wave-lashed cave.**

<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/THE+CRUEL+SEA%3B+DIVER+MICHAEL%3A+unsung+hero+who+died+trying+to+save...-a0197176630>

Byline: LYNNE KELLEHER

COASTGUARD and Garda divers have told of their heartbreak at losing one of their men as he made the ultimate sacrifice during a dramatic sea rescue.

Diver Michael Heffernan, 40, died battling a raging sea to get to his freezing and terrified neighbours, the Murphy family, in Belderrig Cave in Killala Bay in Mayo in October, 1997.

The hidden work of the country's greatest heroes, who often risk their lives for voluntary organisations, is featured in a new RTE series, Rescue.

The 24-hour rescue of Tony Murphy, his wife Carmel and their daughter, Emma, 11, involved 11 different organisations including air, sea and diving rescuers, and fisherman.

The family had gone on a boat trip with their German neighbour, Will Von Below, but his 16ft currach was hit by a rogue wave, killing Mr Below and washing the family up on a tiny stretch of beach at the back of the cave.

Coastguard Martin Kavanagh, who almost lost his own life in the rescue, was outside the cave feeding a lifeline to Michael when the rope went slack.

He said: "We had a lifeline on Michael's wrist and I shook Michael's hand when he left the boat and said 'Take care'".

"He said 'Don't worry, Marty' and I said 'All right, Michael'. I was watching the rope in my hand and all of a sudden it stopped and started. Then it just stopped.

"It was one of the worst things I've experienced as a member of the coastguard when I pulled the rope in and there was nothing there. We had to expect the worst.

Nobody knew.

" A few hours later his colleagues found Michael's body in the cave.

Survivor Tony Murphy said it was a miracle he and his family were spotted. He said he was amazed at the sheer bravery of the diver.

He said: "Talk about courage. It was amazing. Michael Heffernan lost his life trying to save me. I'll never forget that. Two of my friends lost their lives. It will always be with me and I can never take that back.

" For three or four years afterwards I was in bits. I had to do a lot of counselling. I have a different way of looking at life. I appreciate every minute of it."

## **Rescue will be shown on RTE One tonight at 7.30pm. Heroism Of Michael Heffernan**

<http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/heroism-of-michael-heffernan-1.123891>  
Fri, Nov 7, 1997

Sir, - Kevin Myers's Irishman's Diary (November 1st) about the tragic death of the diver Michael Heffernan came as very welcome support to his wife Anna Marie, his extended family, and the members of Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club.

The media reports at the time of these dramatic events had dismissed Michael's contribution in the rescue attempts of the Murphy family as that of an "amateur" diver who attempted a rescue himself, and perished. His family and diving friends therefore rejoiced when, at last, somebody recognised a hero, especially at the distance from which Mr Myers was writing. Those involved in the rescue operation that night are all agreed that what Michael Heffernan attempted to do was indeed a truly brave deed.

I would like to add to Kevin Myers's article by giving some of the details of which he was unaware at the time of his writing.

Michael Heffernan and the other divers from the Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club were called out by the Irish Marine Emergency Service in Dublin to assist in the rescue.

The Ballyglass Lifeboat and the Shannon Rescue Helicopter were already at the scene and had requested that divers be sent to help. Four Grainne Uaile divers immediately responded.

The name of the equally brave and courageous diver who volunteered to accompany Michael Heffernan into the pitch-dark, 1,000-foot long cave was Josie Barrett. The other two Grainne Uaile divers at the scene were Michael Kelly and Noreen Ralston.

Michael did personally know the family whom he was attempting to rescue from the cave, as they worked with him in the Asahi Fibre Plant in Killala.

Michael and Josie knew that the people were alive at the back of the cave, as locals and the lifeboat crew could hear a Klaxon alarm and could see reflective strips from the family's lifejackets with their searchlights.

There were two things that Michael and Josie did not know: firstly, how long the family had left before they would perish; and secondly, the savage conditions at the end of that long, funnelling, dark cave.

Garda Superintendent Tony McNamara is indeed one of the coxes of the Ballyglass Lifeboat, but on the night in question he commanded the operation from the pier at Belderrig. The Arun Class lifeboat from Ballyglass was coxed by Gerry Reilly.

The Garda Sub Aqua Unit divers, Sean O'Connell, Ciaran Doyle and Dave Mulhall were taken into the cave on the inflatable of the Killala Unit of the Irish Marine Emergency Service crewed by locals Sean McHale and Martin Kavanagh, also brave men. This inflatable and all on board were stranded at the back of the cave until Garda Kieran Doyle attempted to swim to the outside with a line attached.

The local trawlermen also showed tremendous courage in bringing their boats under the cliff face at the cave entrance in order to take the tow for the daring pull to safety. The skippers of these boats were Patrick O'Donnell, Martin O'Donnell and Tony O'Donnell.

The North Western Fisheries Board crews launched their boats in order to provide an inflatable for Garda divers Joe Finnergan and Kieran Flynn to enter the cave and recover the bodies of Michael Heffernan and Wil Von Below. The Fisheries inflatable was skilfully and courageously kept on station inside the mouth of the cave by Fisheries Inspector Michael Hughes, while the two Garda divers swam to the end of the cave and completed the recovery.

Yes, there were many heroes at the scene of the tragedy, and Michael is the only one who lost his life. Kevin Myers is correct in saying that he should be remembered in a very special way. Since Michael was involved in the rescue at the request of a State agency, namely The Irish Marine Emergency Service, the State has a responsibility and should indeed take action to have his name honoured and remembered.

Whether this happens or not, Michael's friends in the Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club are determined that his name will not be forgotten. In time we will commission a

suitable monument to the memory of his brave deed. Kevin Myers can be sure of an invitation to its unveiling.

- Yours, etc.,  
From Pat O'Malley  
Chairman, Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club, Ballina, Co Mayo.

## **Statue will commemorate volunteer diver killed in sea-cave rescue**

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/statue-will-commemorate-volunteer-diver-killed-in-sea-cave-rescue-1.1110467>

Wed, Oct 18, 2000

A statue of Michael Heffernan, a volunteer diver who died after rescuing a family from a sea cave in 1997, will be unveiled in Co Mayo next Saturday.

The broadcaster and Irish Times journalist Kevin Myers will unveil the statue at Lacken Pier, Co Mayo. Mr Heffernan, who was 40, lost his life while saving a family whose boat capsized at Belderrig on October 25th, 1997.

He was a member of the Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club in Ballina and was the first voluntary rescue diver to die in a rescue operation.

The unveiling will be attended by his widow, Anna Marie, and family, members of the rescue services, including helicopter pilots and lifeboat representatives who were involved in the rescue, and members of the Garda Water Unit, who received the Scott medal for bravery.

Since his death, Mr Heffernan's action has been recognised by the award of the Carnegie Hero Trust Medallion, by a bravery award from the RNLi and by the Dr John Igoe Community Award. On February 26th, 1999, his wife accepted the Michael Heffernan Memorial Gold Medal, which was presented by the Minister for the Marine, Dr Woods.

This award was instituted by the Department of the Marine to be awarded to persons who displayed exceptional valour while taking part in an Irish coastguard co-ordinated mission.

The Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club members set up the Michael Heffernan Memorial Trust Fund, and according to a spokesman it is with great pride that they will unveil the statue on Saturday.

He recalled that the coroner, Dr Michael Loftus, had said at the inquest: "Our hope, and indeed our prayer, is that as the intensity of the wound begins to recede by the passing of God's healing time, the real meaning and magnitude of Michael's bravery

will remain as a consoling light in their lives. In Christian terms it is the zenith of practical love to give one's life for another.

"This is what Michael Heffernan did. His heroism will, for many years to come, evoke in all of us an appreciative and prayerful silence.

"The time may well come when his practical heroism will be marked and honoured nationally and locally in some notable, tangible way.

## Pat O'Donnell, a Hero

<http://www.shelltosea.com/content/pat-odonnell-hero>

28th Oct 2006 **By:** Lorna Siggins, The Irish Times, An Irishwoman's Diary

Here's a story which illustrates the impact that a controversial project is having on a close-knit community. Nine years ago this week, emergency services received a report that four people had not returned from a boat trip to Belderrig pier in north Mayo.



Retired German businessman Will Ernest von Below had taken Tony Murphy, his wife Carmel, and their 11-year old daughter, Emma, for a trip in his five-metre currach. They had explored the wonderful sea caves at the foot of cliffs at Horse island, when they ran into trouble. They managed to take refuge in one of the larger caves, and were then trapped when their currach capsised.

It was 5.30pm, with only an hour of light left, when the Ballyglass RNLI lifeboat, the Irish Coast Guard unit in Killala and local fishing vessels began to search the coastline - not knowing where the party were. Pat O'Donnell, fisherman and skipper of the Blath Bawn, had heard the alert on VHF radio emergency channel 16 when he was in his house.

O'Donnell couldn't locate his crew, but his 12-year-old son Jonathan was game to come. O'Donnell's brothers, Tony and Martin, also steamed out to search. At about 7pm, shouts and whistles were heard coming from a tideline-level cave on Horse Island. Lights trained on a cave mouth could pick out the reflective strips of lifejackets. "As long as the strips were moving we knew they were alive," Pat O'Donnell says.

Co-ordinator of the rescue was Supt Tony McNamara, second coxswain of the Ballyglass lifeboat - and now chief superintendant and head of the Mayo Garda division. He spent the night working on a hand-held VHF, and had to use a phone in a private house some three-quarters of a mile from the pier to call for extra resources - including the Garda Water Unit in Dublin. Estimated times of arrival were complicated by the fact that the clocks were about to change.

Yet that changing time was of the essence. The tide would eventually fill the cave, and so the Ballina-based Grainne Uaile diving club agreed to help. The Irish Coast Guard Killala unit rescue boat took the club divers to the cave mouth and stood by them as two of them, Josie Barrett and Michael Heffernan, swam in with a light line. However, in three-metre waves the divers became separated, and Barrett was eventually picked up in a state of complete exhaustion.

It was assumed that Heffernan had reached the group, and the Garda divers were fully kitted out when they were dropped by the Shannon-based Sikorsky helicopter in a field close to the pier. Sean McHale and Martin Kavanagh of the Irish Coast Guard battled the enormous swell at the cave mouth, making repeated efforts to carry the Garda divers in.

The boat was eventually tossed up and thrown onto boulders in the cave. The rescuers found the Murphy family huddled together in a crevice, just a metre above sea level. And they discovered two bodies - those of Mr von Below and Michael Heffernan. The club diver had been hurled against rocks as he tried so valiantly to reach the family.

At this stage, the Irish Coast Guard inflatables's engine had been damaged beyond repair, and there appeared to be only one option. The survivors would be loaded on board, and Garda Ciaran Doyle would swim 1,000 metres out with a 250-metre line.

O'Donnell's Blath Bawn was on standby, as it had been for hours, a metre from rocks at the cave mouth. For Garda Doyle, it was an act of incredible faith. Pat O'Donnell spotted the Garda diver emerging. He recovered him, and the essential line, from the water. Working with his brother, Martin, in a sister craft, Sinéad, O'Donnell hauled the Irish Coast Guard inflatable out. The Murphys, the Irish Coast Guard crew and Doyle's fellow divers were brought to safety, and then transferred to the Ballyglass lifeboat which had been standing some way off.

O'Donnell returned to recover the bodies of Will Ernest von Below and Michael Heffernan. At the State's first marine rescue awards some 18 months later, Heffernan was awarded a gold medal posthumously. He had become the first civilian volunteer to die in a marine rescue since the establishment of IMES, now the Irish Coast Guard. A bronze statue in his memory was subsequently unveiled by his wife, Annamarie, and their two children, Leigh Anne and Michelle, at Lacken pier.

Silver medals were given to Garda Ciaran Doyle, Sean McHale of the Irish Coast Guard and Josie Barrett of the Grainne Uaile diving club. Bronze medals were given to Garda Dave Mulhall and Garda Sean O'Connell, and to Martin Kavanagh, McHale's assistant on the Irish Coast Guard inflatable. Pat O'Donnell and his brothers received letters of thanks. O'Donnell remembers that his son, Jonathan, "worked like a man that night".

Such experiences can test and forge the strongest bonds between those involved off coast and onshore, and the fishermen and divers were to meet again in another search a year later and at subsequent events.

Just over a fortnight ago, Pat O'Donnell was one of four fishermen arrested and subsequently released at the Corrib gas terminal protests. Among the gardaí facing him in Belmullet Garda Station were two of the team he had worked with off Horse Island on that fateful night.



**Rescue RTÉ One**, Sunday 7.30pm

[http://www.rte.ie/tv/rescue/s1\\_ep1.html](http://www.rte.ie/tv/rescue/s1_ep1.html)  
(Videos are no longer available)



About  
Episode 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, Video  
Episode one: Belderrig Cave Rescue

Sunday 5th April 2009

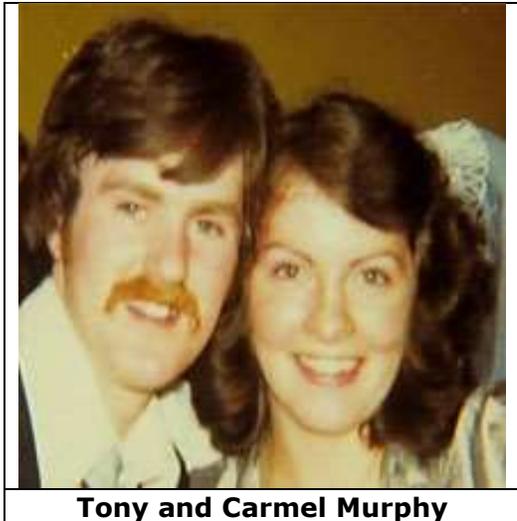
On October 26th 1997 in Co Mayo, Tony Murphy, his wife Carmel and their 11'-year-old daughter, Emma, went on a boat trip with their German neighbour, Will Von Below. But soon the currach was hit by a dramatic freak wave and capsized. Will Von Below was tragically killed as the Murphy family was washed into a 1000



**The Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club**

ft sea cave. Hours went by before the survivors were finally spotted by local fishermen. It was the beginning of one of Ireland's most arduous rescue operations.

The rescue itself would last 24 hours, involve more than 11 agencies and over 60 people. An RTÉ camera man filmed the heroic operation. Most of the footage has never been seen before. The Irish Coast Guard, Grainne Uaile Sub Aqua Club, the Garda Water Unit and the RNLI were just some of the agencies involved. Michael Heffernan, a member of the local diving club sadly lost his life in the rescue effort.



**Tony and Carmel Murphy**

For the first time Tony Murphy and the men who saved his family tell of the dramatic Belderrig rescue—a rescue that would change lives and a community forever.

## **Bravery Awards for local heroes**

[http://www.mayonews.ie/?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=18838:bravery-awards-for-local-heroes&catid=23:news&Itemid=46](http://www.mayonews.ie/?option=com_content&view=article&id=18838:bravery-awards-for-local-heroes&catid=23:news&Itemid=46)

05 NOVEMBER 2013 **Neill O'Neill**

Tragedy at Belderrig recalled as bravery awards bestowed on local heroes

A SAD chapter in north Mayo community life was recalled last week, when four local men were presented with national bravery awards at a ceremony in Farmleigh House in Dublin, some 16 years after their heroism saved three members of one family, in an incident where two lives were tragically lost.

Seán McHale and Martin Kavanagh from Killala, along with Martin O'Donnell and Patrick O'Donnell from Porturlin, all played a part in one of the most heroic and complex rescues ever seen in the county, during a two-day incident in 1997.

“Were it not for the seamanship, skill, ingenuity and bravery of these four people more lives would have indeed been lost,” the special awards ceremony heard last week, and for their efforts, Seán McHale, Martin Kavanagh, Martin O'Donnell and Patrick O'Donnell were each awarded a Certificate of Bravery.

At the same ceremony, Aideen Ryan, also from Killala, was similarly awarded a Certificate of Bravery, for her role in a separate water rescue that took place in 2002.

### **1997 tragedy and rescue**

On October 25, 1997, a major rescue was launched in an area known as Lady's Bay near Belderrig. A currach with a family of three and another person on board was in

difficulty after hitting rocks. The group had been exploring the coastline and some sea caves at Horse Island.

The tragedy began to unfold at 11am that morning, when 53-year-old German national Ernest von Below, a retired banker who had lived in the Belderrig area for several years, along with Tony and Carmel Murphy and their daughter Eimear, put to sea in the 16-foot currach that Mr Von Below had recently purchased.

While exploring near a cave, their currach was smashed against rocks and the strong tide swept the group of four into the long dark cave. Mr Below was lost in the rising tide but the Murphy family managed to get themselves into a crevice just above the water.

They remained there for 17 hours as a frantic rescue operation – involving the Ballina-based Gráinne Uaile Diving Team, Ballyglass Lifeboat, Killala Coast and Cliff Rescue Unit, Ballina Fire Brigade, Gardaí and locals – got under way.

However, tragedy was to strike again when 38-year-old Michael Heffernan, a founding member of the Gráinne Uaile Diving Club, died after waves smashed him against rocks at the entrance to the pitch-dark cave, having become separated from a colleague after they had entered the water to help. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that Michael had turned down the chance to travel to Malta on a diving trip with his club mates in order to be at home with his wife, Ann Marie, who was expecting the couple's second child.

The Murphy family were rescued just before dawn the next day when a five-man team from the Garda Sub Aqua Unit, who were flown into Belderrig by the Shannon Marine Rescue Service, brought them to safety during a dangerous and heroically executed rescue operation, carried out in tandem with other emergency service personnel and local people.

Seán McHale and Martin Kavanagh were members of Killala Coast and Cliff Rescue Services who entered the cave with the Garda divers in an inflatable dinghy. Pat and Martin O'Donnell, aboard their respective trawlers 'Blath Bán' and 'Sineád', performed the complex towing operation.

Despite the dinghy also getting into trouble, and there being eight people essentially trapped in the cave at one point, one of the Garda divers swam out several hundred yards to the Blath Bán with a rope, and, eventually, everybody was taken to safety from the cave.

## **2002 rescue**

On May 8, 2002, after returning from a boat trip to Inishbiggle, Aideen Doran and several work colleagues noticed that the boatman had gotten into difficulty while trying to get the vessel ashore. On realising the seriousness of the situation Aideen entered the water, swam out to the boatman, and, with the assistance of another woman, Sarah Togher, succeeded in bringing both the man and his boat safely back to shore.

## Outstanding

Last week's awards, presented to Seán McHale, Martin Kavanagh, Martin O'Donnell, Patrick O'Donnell and Aideen Ryan, were among 21 presented by Ceann Comhairle Seán Barrett at the national ceremony in recognition of outstanding acts of bravery. The honours were awarded by Comhairle na Míre Gaile – the Deeds of Bravery Council – which was established in 1947 to provide for suitable recognition by the State of deeds of bravery.

## From a Prison Cell to a State Luncheon

<http://www.shelltosea.com/content/prison-cell-state-luncheon>

6 November 2013 James Laffey - The Western People

It's a long way from a cell in Castlerea Prison to an audience with the Garda Commissioner in the opulent surrounds of Farmleigh House in Dublin's Phoenix Park. But if there's any man who could achieve that turnaround in a few short years its the inimitable fisherman from North Mayo Pat "The Chief" O'Donnell.

Three years ago, O'Donnell became an anti-establishment hero after the acclaimed television documentary *The Pipe* was broadcast across the globe. The documentary charted O'Donnell's tireless and colourful opposition to the Corrib Gas pipeline, highlighting a 'David versus Goliath' battle as the chain-smoking fisherman doggedly refused to bow to the combined might of State and corporate interests.

O'Donnell ended up in a prison cell for seven months after he was labelled a "thug and a bully" by a circuit court judge, a scathing denunciation that said more about the judge's wretched inability to understand the complexities of the Corrib Gas debacle than it did about O'Donnell.

Last Friday afternoon in Farmleigh House, Pat O'Donnell heard a very different assessment of his character from the Ceann Comhairle of the Dáil, Seán Barrett TD. The Porturlin man was one of 21 people from across the country to be recognised for outstanding acts of bravery. O'Donnell's brother Martin and Killala men Seán McHale and Martin Kavanagh were awarded Certificates of Bravery for their role in the rescue of a family from a sea cave in Belderrig, North Mayo, on October 25th, 1997.



**2013: Pat & Martin O'Donnell pictured with the Garda Commissioner Martin Callanan after receiving an award for bravery.**

In honouring the 21 recipients, which included several Gardaí, the Ceann Comhairle remarked: "Today we celebrate, recognise and give thanks to members of our communities who, through their acts of selfless courage have helped other people. In going to the aid of others at great risk to their own safety, our award winners have brought great pride to themselves and their families...One cannot fail to be impressed by the strength of spirit shown by the recipients of these awards. It is that strength of spirit that makes our communities better places in which to live, that selfless sacrifice and endeavour that lifts us all and benefits us all."

Pat O'Donnell could never be accused of lacking "strength of spirit". Whether one agrees or disagrees with his controversial stance on the Corrib Gas Project, its impossible not to acknowledge O'Donnell's gritty determination and unflagging character. Its those sort of characteristics that proved to be invaluable on the night



**2007: Martin & Pat O'Donnell after getting beaten by Shell bribed Gardai, for trying to protect their area and community**

of October 25th, 1997, when O'Donnell was presented with the greatest challenge of his long seafaring career. It was a Bank Holiday Saturday and Pat, then aged 40, was at home when he heard a Mayday over the VHF radio. A boating tour had gone horribly wrong and four people -

three adults and a child – were trapped in a sea cave at Lady's Bay, near Belderrig. O'Donnell knew the area well. He had spent the past 20 years fishing for lobster at the mouth of the 1,000 feet long sea cave.

"There was no wind which gave the impression that it was a calm day," he recalls. "But there was a sea swell and that's what makes those caves deadly."

Only hours earlier, the Murphy family – Tony, Carmel and young daughter Eimear – had taken a boat from Belderrig harbour in the company of German native Will Ernst Von Below. The German was an experienced sailor – he had competed in the 1972 Munich Olympics – but the caves on the North Mayo coastline are treacherous. Mr Von Below's boat was in the sea cave when a 15-foot wave engulfed it, throwing the four occupants overboard. The 53-year-old German drowned but the Murphy family managed to clamber onto rocks and commenced shouting for assistance. Local fishermen, who had become alarmed when the boat failed to return to Belderrig, eventually located the family in the sea-cave.

A Mayday was issued and Pat O'Donnell boarded his trawler, Bláth Bán, and headed at full speed for Lady's Bay, accompanied by his 12-year-old son Jonathan. When he reached the location, Pat was met by his brother Martin in his boat, Sinéad. The boats could not enter the cave but Pat knew it was vital to let the people inside know that help had arrived.

"I knew there was people alive because I could see the illumination from their lifejackets and I could see them moving," he recalls. "So, I positioned the Bláth Bán at the entrance to the cave and shone my lights in. I felt it was vital to keep the cave illuminated, to let the survivors know that we were there and we weren't going away. It was crucial to give them hope so their spirits would be kept alive."

O'Donnell initially believed that he would only have to remain outside the cave an hour or two, but instead it became a marathon rescue operation. An inquest in Ballina later heard that the O'Donnell brothers suggested sending an unmanned dinghy into the cave attached to a rope tied onto the Bláth Bán. But the idea was rejected. Two divers from the Gráinne Uaile sub aqua club in Ballina heroically entered the cave and one of them, Michael Heffernan, aged 38, tragically lost his life. The other, Josie Barrett, was fortunate to escape from the churning waters. He told the inquest: "I tried to gain Michael's attention but we were hit by another high wave which threw us around...the waves broke over the top of us and pitched us about the place."

Following the tragic loss of Michael Heffernan, a decision was made to send for the Garda sub aqua unit based in Santry in Dublin. It meant the rescue operation would be delayed for several hours and for Pat O'Donnell that meant a long, tense night on the deck of the Bláth Bán. "It was very difficult to keep my boat in the same position for hours on end. It was within a few feet of the rocks so I had to concentrate, concentrate, concentrate. There was no way to relax, not even for a minute to have a cigarette. If I had lost concentration we were onto the rocks, without a doubt."

The arrival of the Garda sub aqua team led to a council of war on the Ballyglass Lifeboat. It was decided that a team led by the garda divers, as well as Seán McHale and Martin Kavanagh of Killala Cliff, Coast and Rescue Service, would enter the cave and bring the Murphy family to safety. It was a very dangerous mission. The inflatable dinghy containing the party of five was swept up by the waves in the cave and thrown onto the rocks, causing damage to the propeller. There were now eight people trapped in the cave.

The only way to get the boat out was to pull it to safety but that was easier said than done. As dawn began to rise, Garda Ciaran Doyle volunteered to swim out of the cave with a 700 foot rope and attach it to the Bláth Bán. "It was very risky because he had to swim a couple of hundred yards," recalls Pat O'Donnell. "He was exhausted when he reached our boat and we pulled him aboard and attached the rope. The gardaí had brought a VHF radio into the cave so we were able to contact them inside and instruct them to get into the dinghy."

The operation to pull the dinghy from the cave fraught with danger. Pat O'Donnell describes it as the tensest moment in his 45-year seafaring career. "My boat was facing into the cave so I had to reverse out. I also had to keep tension on the rope because if it slackened the dinghy would be lost. On top of all that I had to make sure I kept my boat away from the rocks. In the end, Martin tied a rope from his boat Sinéad to my vessel and he made sure I kept away from the rocks while I concentrated on pulling the inflatable out. The cave was at a 90-degree angle, which meant the rope could have snapped if it came into contact with the sharp rocks at the entrance to the sea cave. It took maybe a few minutes to pull the inflatable out but it felt like forever. It was a complex and dangerous operation but thank God we got everybody out safely, apart of course from the two unfortunate men who lost their lives."

The dramatic events of that October night seems a long time ago. Three years after the sea rescue, Pat O'Donnell learned for the first time that the Corrib Gas terminal was to be located in North Mayo. He attended the first hearings in the Downhill Hotel in Ballina and was not impressed with what he heard. "The more I heard the more angry I became," he recalls. "This project was going to destroy our area and the potential for damage to the fishing grounds in Broadhaven Bay was immense."

Pat O'Donnell's opposition to Corrib escalated in the ensuing years, culminating in a stand-off on the high seas in the summer of 2009, which was memorably depicted in *The Pipe*. The dramatic footage of O'Donnell on the deck of his boat demanding that gardaí handcuff him is as tragic as it is colourful. A decade earlier he had been putting his life on the line to rescue gadaí from the sea cave in Belderrig.

O'Donnell remains unrepentant about his involvement in the Corrib protests and assures this reporter he is "not finished yet". "I have no regrets. I'd do it all again in the morning. I was only a few days in Castlerea Prison when the Horizon oil disaster happened in the Gulf of Mexico. That brought home to me why it was worth sacrificing my freedom for the protection of the waters I had fished since I was a boy. I was a political prisoner, a prisoner of conscience and I will never apologise for the stance I took."

O'Donnell first went to sea at the age of 13 - "it was either fish or emigrate" - and is the fourth generation of his family to eke a living from the Atlantic waters. His sons are now involved in the family fishing business, which involves the export of lobsters and crabs to France and Spain. He is proud that the family fishing tradition is now in its fifth generation and third century.

Among those to congratulate "The Chief" last Friday afternoon was the Garda Commissioner Martin Callanan. "He came up and shook my hand and said 'Well done'," recalls O'Donnell with a wry chuckle "I think he knew who I was!"