

Sam's story

For Sam Cully (35) from Portavogie, it was like any other day out sea. A fisherman by trade since leaving school, he was accustomed to how volatile sea conditions could be.

In September 2013, the unthinkable happened when his vessel sank off the coast of County Down, Northern Ireland. The sea state was rough with force five to six winds.

For the last month, Sam had been wearing a grant- aided Compact personal flotation device (PFD) or lifejacket. The fact that he was wearing the lifejacket when his accident occurred was crucial, as the first compartment of the boat to flood held all other lifesaving equipment on board.

He had been told the PFD would automatically inflate on contact with water. As he plunged into the sea, he had no choice but to place his trust in the life-saving device.

The personal flotation device inflated instantly while the boat sank in a matter of minutes. As it did, Sam watched on and couldn't believe the gravity of his situation- his boat was gone and he was alone and in danger several miles from land.

Every minute Sam spent in the water was cold and tiring. The rough sea state meant that he began swallowing water and very quickly started to suffer from fatigue.

As he started to lose consciousness, help arrived.

Earlier, Belfast Coastguard had received an emergency call from a distressed male, stating that his boat was rapidly taking on water and sinking.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) sent a team to investigate immediately.

Sam had been in the water for more than 50 minutes and had all but given up hope when he was spotted and pulled to safety by Portaferry Inshore Lifeboat (RNLI).

Just a month prior to the accident, Sam had been provided with his personal flotation device without which he wouldn't be alive today, in a grant-aided scheme run by The Fishermen's Mission and supported by Seafish. Many organisations collaborated to make this project possible- the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the European Fisheries Fund, the RNLI, MCA, the local Fish Producer Organisations, Asda Supermarket and a host of others provided funding and support.

The programme in Northern Ireland has so far seen over 600 fishermen receive grant- aided personal flotation devices, and a training film has been developed by Seafish to demonstrate the correct way to wear, maintain and service the PFDs.

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Six months on from Sam's terrifying ordeal, he is supporting the 'Sea You Home Safe' campaign led by Seafish to encourage more fishermen to wear personal flotation devices.

Sam, of Portavogie, County Down, said: "It took only two to three minutes for my boat to sink and for me to be lying in the sea with my boat upside down next to me.

"If I hadn't have been wearing the personal flotation device provided by Seafish and The Fishermen's Mission, I wouldn't be here today.

"I'd urge all fishermen to think of their partners and family and wear a flotation device, you never know, it may save your life."