

The man who was a bridge

It was 1987. The ferry set sail from Zeebrugge on time. All the people and cars were loaded. It carried holiday-makers returning home, business men and long distance lorry drivers. All of them would have had thoughts of their families and homes that lay some five hours sailing time away.

The men on the bridge guided the huge vessel carefully out of port. The restaurant opened for service and people settled down for the voyage.

The men on the car deck were making a last check of the fittings that held the cars and lorries in place. The giant mouth of the entrance to the deck was still gaping open revealing a huge swell of sea. The doors should have been closing. Instead, in an awful moment, the sea flooded in. The ferry lurched under the extra weight. The cars and lorries shifted. The vessel began to list heavily to one side.

Shouts and screams filled the public areas. Tables, chairs and luggage slid downward carrying people into the rising water and mud. Top became bottom, ceilings became floors, panic gripped everyone. Some passengers out on deck were rescued very quickly. Others were not so

lucky. It was time for cool heads and bravery to save and rescue as many as possible.

One group of people escaping from the cafeteria came face to face with a gaping hole which they could not cross. Beyond it was their only way out. Among them was Andrew Parker, a strapping man of more than six feet tall. He laid himself across the gap and the water that was still rising fast. People climbed across his body to safety. Mums and dads and children, more than twenty people in all, were saved by the man who made himself a bridge.



Andrew was awarded the George medal for his bravery. Afterwards he said he was not trying to be a hero, he just did what he thought was right. A total of 31 people received awards for their bravery and courage on that day.