

Saving Shipwrecked Sailors

By Bob Lang

The Scandinavian nations have always been in the forefront of providing Aids to Navigation (ATN) and Sea Rescue Services because, for the most part, their countries are either partially or completely surrounded by water, and navigation for trade and transport is an essential part of their livelihood. Postage stamps showing maritime safety services fall into two categories: (1) **passive**, such as lighthouses, light ships, daymarks and other ATN, and (2) **active**, where one human being makes an effort to save the life of another, using a device such as a lifeboat, breeches buoy, life car, life ring or helicopter.

History shows that as early as 1560, Danish King Frederick II decreed that the shipping route between Denmark and Sweden be marked with beacons and buoys. This was a significant event in maritime history. Also, the first man-made ATN was the Danish-invented lever light (*Facit* Denmark 409), set out at Skagen in 1627. Other Scandinavian countries soon followed with towers of their own. In fact, Swedish inventor Gustaf Dalen's sun valve, depicted on a stamp (*Facit* Sweden 1748) and aga flasher in 1912, led to lighthouse automation around the world. His likeness is found on a stamp (*Facit* Sweden 805) for receiving a Nobel Prize in physics for these inventions.



Over recent years there have been many stamps issued featuring

lighthouses and other **passive**

type “safety at sea” techniques; on the other hand, very few stamps recognize the **active** and benevolent “sea rescue” service organizations. It is 16 sea rescue stamps (in 10 different issues) that will be the focus of this article.

Saving human lives from the perils of the sea via an organized effort — volunteer or government assisted — is comparatively new. In 1737, Chinese records show five lifeboats in service along the Min River. The earliest organized European efforts at lifesaving were concerned primarily with saving victims from drowning, not shipwrecked seamen.

It was not until 1824 that the English founded the first Lifeboat Institution. The Dutch established theirs the same year, and the U.S. followed in 1848. The Danes were next in 1852, followed by the Norwegians (1891), the Finns (1897), the Swedes (1907), and finally Iceland established its National Lifesaving Association in 1928.

The Danes, a long-time seafaring nation, recognized the need to provide rescue services, not only to their own mariners, but also to those of other nations. Thus, in 1852 they established the Danish Lifesaving Service. A century later, they were the first Scandinavian country to issue a stamp





(*Facit* Denmark 357) commemorating the founding of this humanitarian effort. A myriad of First Day Covers exist, many with cachets showing lifeboat type rescues.

Denmark issued a set of three stamps in 1996 featuring wooden dinghies (*Facit* Denmark 1154-56). The lower value, 3.50 kr. (issued for local B-class mail), shows a small sailing boat that was used in and around Roskilde Fjord. Few collectors are aware that these small boats were used as lifeboats from the early to the mid-19th Century on larger fishing vessels before they were equipped with rubber life-rafts.

Norway established its Society for Sea Rescue in 1891. Its founder, Colin Archer, is featured on the four-stamp semi-postal set (*Facit* Norway 260-263) issued in 1941 for the society's 50th anniversary. The high values show the first wooden sailing vessels used by the society and built by Archer, who also built the famed polar vessel "Fram." Shown on page 5 is a 1943 German-censored, registered express cover to Sweden using the entire lifesaving issue.



In June 1991, the Norwegian Society became 100 years old. A two-value set (*Facit* Norway 1110-1111) was issued showing the evolution of the lifeboat, from the old wooden sailing vessel (27.00 Kr. value) to the fast power boats (3.20 Kr. value) of today. By its centenary year, the society had grown to more than 800 local branches, 250 specially trained personnel, and 33 state-of-the-art vessels.



Although Sweden initiated Lifesaving services as early as 1865, it did not officially organize a Sea Rescue and Lifeboat Service until 1907. On the 50th anniversary in 1957, a two-value set (*Facit* Sweden 486-487) with a single theme was issued, showing a lifeboat coming to the rescue of several seamen on the deck of a disabled vessel. The First Day Cancel shows the emblem of the Swedish Lifesaving Society.

In 1975, Sweden issued a five-stamp set (*Facit* Sweden 930-934) in booklet and coil form recognizing the humanitarian work of several organizations, including the Swedish Sea Rescue Service. The 90-öre green stamp (*Facit* 934) shows a helicopter assisting in the rescue of disabled seaman from the German ship, "Mercur."



Finland marked the 100th anniversary of its volunteer Lifeboat



Society in 1997 by issuing a six-stamp booklet (*Facit* Finland 1384-1389) and four maximum cards featuring old sailing ships. One of the vessels, "Merrikokko," (*Facit* 1388) was built expressly as a Sea Rescue vessel in the 1930s, operating out of Uto, a tiny island off the southwest coast (now part of Åland). After a recent refurbishment, it is still in use today. Today the Society boasts more than 100 boats and 10,000 members serving the entire coastline and inland waters of Finland.

Iceland did not establish its National Lifesaving Association until 1928. Shortly thereafter (1933), its Sea Rescue Service was featured on two values of Iceland's first semi-postal set (*Facit* Iceland 200-202). The 10+10 and 35+25 aurer stamps show a life car being used to rescue sailors from a foundering ship. The extra aurer went to the National Lifesaving Association. These stamps are almost unknown postally used on cover.





Also benefiting the Lifesaving Society was the high value 75+25 aurer stamp (*Facit Iceland 292*) of the 1949 charity set. It pictures a lifeboat, filled with shipwrecked survivors, making its way to shore. Here again, the extra 25 aurer went to the sea rescue service.

Iceland issued a single stamp in 1978 (*Facit Iceland 573*) to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the National Lifesaving Association. The stamp shows one of the 87 rescue squads saving seamen from the grounded English fishing trawler, "Dhoon," by means of a breeches buoy. This rescue effort took place in the "West Fjords" region near Latrabjarg and

resulted in saving 12 of the 15 crew. Iceland's volunteer Lifesaving Society also maintains 50 rescue huts at mostly remote beaches where stranded sailors are apt to make land. These are equipped with radios, food, and warm clothing.

The stamps shown above, recognizing the humanitarian sea rescue services and organizations in Scandinavia, are but one aspect of a larger "Safety at Sea" topical collecting area. The author (and editor) hopes you will decide to share one of your sideline topical collecting interests with other members and readers of *The Posthorn*. ■