

Copter crew say tragedy avoided by minutes



The survivors of Le Perrain arrive in Stornoway by helicopter yesterday. Their French skipper is still missing

by Angela Taylor

RESCUERS told yesterday how they plucked 18 fishermen to safety and brought them to dry land minutes before tragedy.

The RAF Lossiemouth helicopter crew embarked on the dramatic rescue operation early on Saturday after the French fishing vessel Le Perrain lost power in heavy seas.

The drama unfolded off the coast of Lewis on Friday night as 70mph winds and 30ft high waves whipped Le Perrain through the night and into Saturday.

The French captain, Yannick Jego, hailed a hero by his crew,

was swept off the vessel on Friday afternoon. No search for him has begun and hope of finding him alive has been abandoned.

The rest of the crew, 15 of whom are believed to be Spanish and three Portuguese, were stranded on the boat after her only liferaft was swept away.

Speaking through an interpreter, they told last night how all radio contact was lost when the antennae was destroyed by the seas. Instead they used a lamp to signal SOS and fired off a red flare.

Flight Lieutenant Tony Gear, 46, captain of the Lossiemouth Sea King helicopter which

winched the terrified men to safety, said there had been doubts whether the helicopter would reach the stricken vessel.

"At one stage we thought we would not be able to make it out there at all.

"If we had gone more than half an hour winching we would not have made Stornoway. We landed with only 15 minutes of fuel left."

As they recovered from their ordeal the crew of Le Perrain told how their skipper battled to keep the bow of the vessel into the storm when a giant wave hit.

"The sea pushed in the front

of the wheelhouse. All the windows broke and the sea came in and filled up the wheelhouse very quickly," said one crewman.

"Then as the ship rose up, the wheelhouse began to empty and everything in there was sucked out with the water.

"The seats went, the equipment went and the skipper went. He was gone."

Stornoway Coastguard had received the initial satellite distress call from the fishing vessel via the French Rescue Centre at Cap Gris Nez at

Turn to Page 7