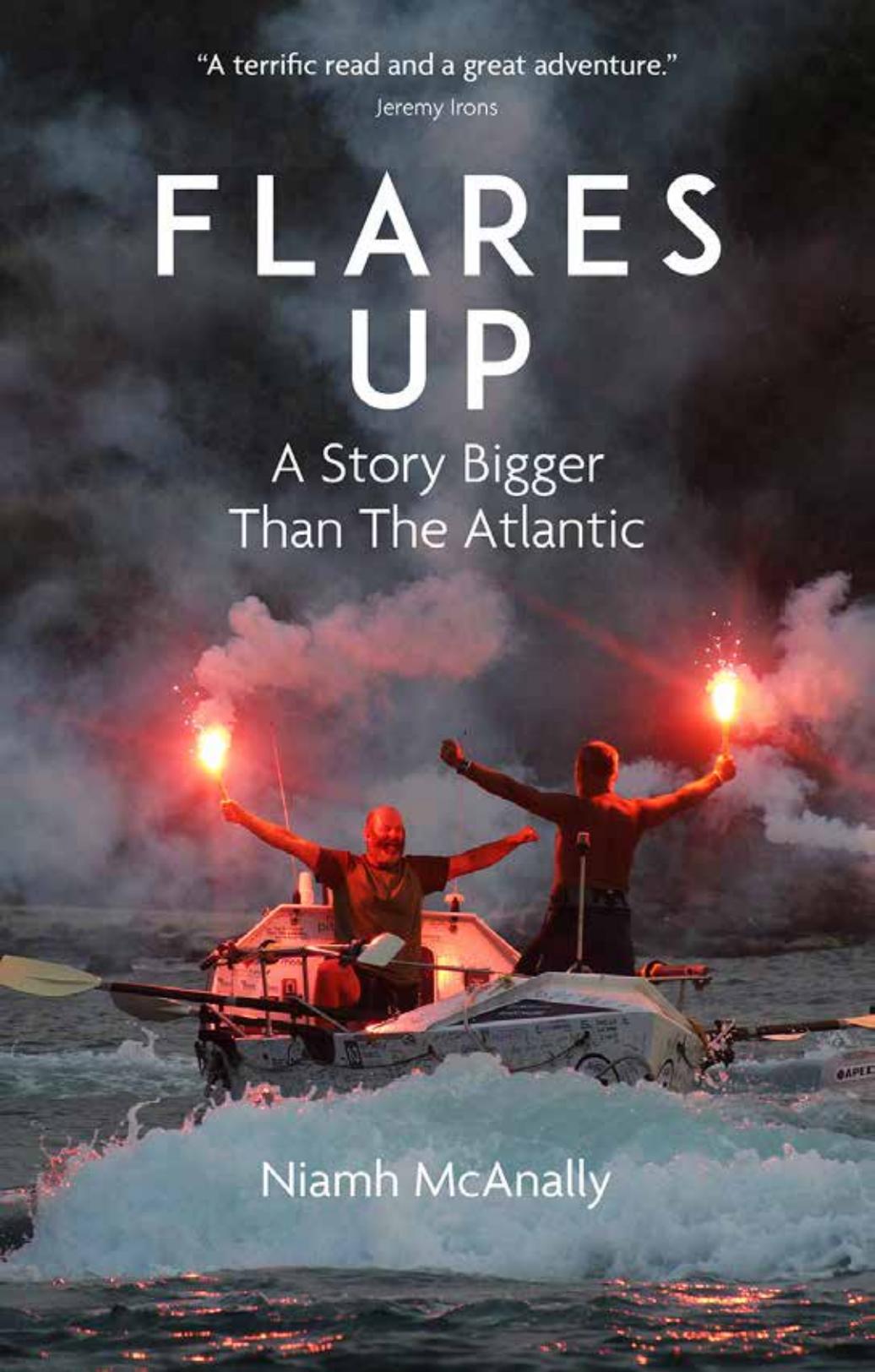


"A terrific read and a great adventure."

Jeremy Irons

# FLARES UP

A Story Bigger  
Than The Atlantic

A dramatic photograph of two men in a small, white inflatable boat on a dark, stormy sea at night. The men are celebrating, with their arms raised and holding bright red flares that illuminate the scene. The boat is splashing through white-capped waves. The overall mood is one of triumph and adventure.

Niamh McAnally

'It's as if fate placed Niamh in the precise place and time to capture this important cover image that tells a thousand words. The decisive moment ... indeed, a defining moment in history. We can feel the churn in the water, the triumph through the expression on his face, and the perfect paired offset geometry of the body positions in the frame. It's "the" shot.

However, that's not the half of it ... if fate placed Niamh there, it was destiny that guided the story to the pages of this book. And there are so many more than a thousand words to be told. I think it's the relatability of Phil and Paul, and the idea that heroes are among us. What a photo, but what a story behind the it. I couldn't put it down.'

*David Evans,  
Australian Landscape Photographer of the Year*

'A compelling read from an author whose intimate knowledge of the sea and seafaring infuses every page.

A story of extraordinary courage and endurance shot through with the enduring power of ordinary love'

*Hilary Fannin,  
Irish Times Columnist of the Year and author of  
The Weight of Love and Hopscotch*

# FLARES UP

A Story Bigger  
Than The Atlantic

Niamh McAnally



# PART ONE

## Chapter 1

# 6 September 2014

PAUL HOPKINS was hungry. Dinner at Byker Community Fire Station was hit or miss, depending on who was cooking. Tonight, thankfully, was a hit. His plate was heaped with piping-hot spaghetti bolognese and garlic bread.

‘Smells delicious, Andy, thanks.’

‘Welcome, gaffer.’

While he waited for the lads to pass around the large bowl of parmesan, Paul crunched into the bread. He loved mealtimes, the bonding, the banter, and for him, a break from the office, the reports, and having to wear reading glasses. His boss, and fellow triathlete, Carl Latimer, was on holiday, which left him in charge as acting watch manager.

*Whoop, whoop, whoop ...*

The siren went off. Spoons clattered; chairs screeched backwards. Within seconds the first person was down the pole. Paul tore the message off the printer. He’d already assigned duties for the evening – Doug would drive, Bill and Maurice would wear the breathing apparatus – now he shouted the address.

When they pulled up at the student accommodation block for one of Newcastle upon Tyne’s universities, they found the street littered with teenagers, some dressed for bed, others for a Saturday night on the town. But no sign of a fire. Paul hoped this wasn’t another prank call-out, especially since his stomach and dinner had been so rudely separated.

‘Anyone know what happened?’

A chap in a dressing gown came forward.

‘I think it’s my flat.’

‘Okay. Let’s check it out.’

When Paul and his crew reached the young man’s room, they found the detector had been activated, but no sign of any damage.

‘What were you doing that might have set this off?’

‘My hair.’

‘Sorry?’

‘I think I used too much cream. My straighteners started smoking.’

‘Right.’

After Paul reset the panel, they headed back to base.

‘It was a splash of Brut in my day,’ said Paul.

‘You’re only jealous,’ Doug said. ‘Been a long time since you needed a hairbrush.’

Paul patted his head. ‘Sooner have a semi-polished noggin than your ugly mop.’

‘At least mine isn’t grey,’ said Doug.

‘I think you’ll find my Nicola calls this colour “distinguished”.’

‘She’s biased.’

‘Biased wife, happy life.’

Doug laughed. ‘This from the man on his third marriage.’

‘I’m a slow learner.’

As they drove through town Paul noticed the pubs and restaurants had started to fill. They were in for a busy weekend with all the out-of-towners who had descended on Newcastle for the half-marathon tomorrow. If he wasn’t working, he wouldn’t mind heading out for a pint or two himself. He loved the pub atmosphere. He’d met almost everyone he’d ever dated in a bar, including Diane, his first wife, and mother of his two older sons, Sean and Jamie, and Vicki, his second wife, too. Well, if he couldn’t go out for a beer, the next best thing was

a good plate of grub. Fifteen minutes later, he and the crew were once again sitting down to eat. Paul eyed his mountain of food with that heady feeling of love at first sight. He stabbed the pasta with his fork and twirled, scooped the meat sauce on top and shoved the whole lot into his mouth.

‘God, this is a feast, Andy.’

Two more mouthfuls. Joy.

*Whoop, whoop ...*

Once again, the turn-out system transformed the crew like a pack of Pavlov’s dogs. In rapid succession Paul swallowed, jumped, and slid. He ripped the message off the printer.

*Persons reported.*

This was the big one. The practice, the drills, all for this – to rescue people from a burning building. There was no banter now, just the echo of Paul’s announcement being repeated from one firefighter to the next. Persons reported. Seconds could determine life or death.

Lights flashing, alarm screeching, they left the forecourt and drove up the hill. Paul watched Doug rock back and forth in the driver’s seat. His face was taut. This part of the call-out was all on him.

‘Clear left,’ said Paul.

‘Thanks, gaffer.’

Doug took the intersection as fast as he dared, the engine leaning hard over. The fastest route was past the busy bars. Paul scanned the street for idiots. He heard the lads in the back checking their breathing apparatus and in the wing mirror he saw the second fire engine right behind them. Good. Two teams, better chance.

Doug parked the rig as close to the block of flats as possible.

‘Let’s go.’ Even though there was still no sign of a fire, Paul grabbed his kit and ran across the grass. A group of neighbours waved, directing him to the rear of the building.

‘Is anyone home?’ he asked them.

‘Yes, yes,’ one of them answered, ‘the door is locked.’

As soon as Paul came around the corner, he could see smoke coming out of a flat on the ground floor. The windows were blackened. Paul was glad to see a wooden door, not composite.

‘Stand back.’

Paul swung hard and fast with the sledgehammer. He knew breaking the door would add oxygen to the fire, putting his team in more danger, but he had no option but to send them in. He hit the lock full on. The door broke open, wood splinters flew. As the air rushed in, smoke poured out the top of the doorway. Without hesitation Bill and Maurice disappeared into the thick smoke. They were well trained, but, as always, Paul was conscious that he was responsible for whether or not his crew would see their loved ones again. He briefed the second team and sent them in.

Paul radioed Control, letting them know how many people he had committed to the property and the equipment in use. Just after the second crew entered the flat, the first rushed out, Bill carrying a middle-aged woman. He didn’t need to call for oxygen. Maurice had the O<sub>2</sub> mask covering her mouth and nose before Bill set her down on the chair a neighbour had brought. Her face was black with soot, but not burned.

‘Is there anyone else in there?’ Paul asked her.

She coughed, spluttered.

‘Anyone else in there?’

Paul knew she needed to take a breath, to replace the toxic smoke clinging to her throat and lungs, but he had to know. If there was someone else, they only had seconds left.

‘Anyone else?’

The lady gasped. ‘My dogs, save my dogs.’

‘Got it, gaffer.’ Bill and Maurice went back in.

Paul radioed the second pair.

‘How are we doing?’

‘Structure’s okay. Just got two more hotspots.’

‘Okay. Look for dogs.’

‘Copy.’

Paul heard the ambulance arrive. The rush of adrenaline that had flooded his body started to fade. Although his teams were trained first-aiders, it was always a relief to see the paramedics arrive on scene. He sent an update to Control. The fire was almost out, the woman’s breathing was improving. If they could save her dogs, it would be a bonus.

An older couple approached. Paul was happy to let these neighbours console her. The comfort of familiar faces would do her good.

‘Where’s John?’ the gentleman asked her.

‘Who’s John?’ said Paul.

‘Her husband.’

‘Where’s John?’ Paul asked the woman.

She pointed at her flat.

‘Where? What room?’

She shook her head.

‘One more, lads. A man.’

They’d lost valuable time. What would they find? He didn’t want to open that box, the box he kept locked at the back of his mind: images of corpses he’d pulled from burned-out buildings, body parts he’d picked up from railway tracks, human remains he’d cut out of cars. If he let those pictures loose, he would never sleep again.

‘Lads, any sign?’

‘Coming.’

The second crew came out carrying an unconscious man. The ambulance team went to work, pounding on his chest.

The woman gasped. ‘Oh my God, John.’

‘Would you mind walking her to the ambulance?’ Paul asked the neighbours. Real-life CPR was a lot more physical than in the movies.

As he watched the couple lead her away, he wondered how she could have remembered her dogs before her husband. But then, even though he had been to many fires, he had never been

pulled out of one, so who was he to judge? At least he was sure his wife, Nicola, would think of him and their 13-year-old son, James, before their dog, Betty Boo. Wouldn't she?

His radio squawked.

'Gaffer, we have them.'

The first crew emerged, each of them carrying a dog.