

Chapter Twenty Seven

Roaring Forties on agitator cycle

It was times like these near-disasters that forced me into dreaming of better places.

It all began in my teens when I was training for 100 mile races in New Zealand logging up to 400 miles a week on my racing bike. My daily schedule was to bike the 20 miles to work, have a swim in the tide to refresh myself, work all day boatbuilding, have another swim before biking home, have dinner and then I got to go out and do my training. One week end I biked home on the Friday night, had dinner then biked the 72 miles to Nelson over two great mountain climbs, raced a two stage club race to Motueka and return on the Saturday then rode a leisurely 72 miles home with the lads on the Sunday, sprinting into every town's speed limit sign as if it was an imaginary finish line..

Building up to the big races it was more important to get the miles in the legs than sleep, so often when riding on the homeward stretch on a cold winter's night I would 'hit the wall' having 5 to 10 miles still to go.. This weekend was a particularly hard ride and I found myself spent of every available energy factor, tired and having trouble keeping up with my training mates. A pint of milk and a Mars bar would help in those cases but being unprepared and out there in the whop whops there was nothing. So as I had learned to do when I "hit the wall" under extreme physical duress I resorted to dreaming in my mind of already being home, envisioning myself taking my clothes off, throwing on PJ's and climbing into a warm bed and pulling the covers up around me. I had learned that by doing this before long the miles would pass without my body being focused on its agonies and distress and suddenly I would be in that warm safe place called bed. What I didn't know at the time was that I was creating my preferred reality by mentally visualizing and overlaying another one over the current environment. Nor was it something I ever did willingly. I had to be pushed or forced into it to escape the discomfort reality I was in.

For people who are into the bible it is also there,

Mark: 11:24 'Pray as if it has already happened'.

Over the years it had become automatic and second nature to me.

And now down here in the never-never land of the Roaring Forties with still another 1000 miles to travel north to get to my destination, Rapa was where I went as soon as my head hit the pillow. Dreaming of dusky maidens, swimming in the lagoons and walking the beaches at night wrapped in the tropical scents of night blooming jasmine and coconut oil. I had got so good at it by now I would do it while on the helm and it was something I looked forward to.

Nevertheless, I was well aware that we were not yet out of danger. That rogue wave - that vertical wall of water that had treated us like a fly under a huge swatter - was evidence that danger reached huge proportions in these waters.

How many missing clipper ships, we wondered, had gone to their doom in such conditions? Why were there no rhymes about such monster waves? Rhymes such as "water thunder - Go under...forever..."? Obviously there could be no such couplets because no-one had survived to tell the tale. And that too would explain why such rogue waves were considered by many - especially those who had never experienced one as we had and survived to tell the tale, to be figments of the imagination. And maybe the old clipper ships had rigged the huge boarded panel behind the helmsman so that when they heard the noise, they would not turn to see what was coming and run for it. They knew the ships were being lost to something. Dream as I might I knew we had a battle on our hands. Even if we were lucky enough to avoid another such monster, we were still fighting the winds and had only a little bit of reefed trysail up and storm jib as we headed north. The water continued so rough that Highlight wouldn't steer as she normally did to windward. We had to have someone on the helm to guide her through the rough white water at the crest of every gigantic comber.



An approaching wave seen from inside the cabin. Not game to go on deck. Considering waves look one third the size in a photo, this is a big one.

Just how many of those freak waves were down here anyway and did any more of them have us in their sights? The mental strain and the violence of our progress was such that an hour at the wheel was all we could stand.

While on the helm Pat would give little running commentaries aloud to keep his nerve and make sure David and I stayed awake as moral support, telling stories, or making jokes about this or that wave and making sure we didn't sleep, not that he needed to do that. We weren't about to sleep, or couldn't.

The boat would take an age to climb each wave, Pat would say, "We're going up, we're going up, we're going up" And it was just like that. At the helm, through that window it seemed like we were going up a long, long dark hill with a little patch of white foam at the top gleaming from the moonlight in the distance.

The patch would grow and grow, whirling as it came, and then it would explode on you. "Hold on,,," and heart in mouth you would try to guide the ship through it till it no longer seemed to matter with the buffeting it was taking in the broken foam, and all you could do was hold the bunk

flooding into the cabin in spite of locked and bolted companionway doors. A huge wave crashed down abeam, filling the cockpit and striking with such force that water was forced through the cracks around the doors. I remember the cabin sole being awash, and having to bucket the water out. Yet through it all, Highlight held together, and we too held together and as they say "this too shall Pass" and eventually get out of that hellish area, out where the seas were no smaller, but were regular ocean rollers, not breaking. But for days we talked in subdued tones. We all seemed to have grown a lot older. We admitted that we had been praying at times.

David and I took to reading the Bible that had been given us for such emergencies (I guess) on our off watches during the day. Even with our experience of the obnoxious religions through the islands the deep seated programming of fear kicks in. You don't turn to God when things are going great. In our defense I can only say if you don't know any better you are forgiven and it's the bible you are going to turn to. There are no atheists in foxholes, they say.

However, the god we discovered in the Bible, at least in the Old Testament, turned out to be someone we would never want to share a foxhole with - let alone a trip through the Roaring Forties.

We did enjoy the beginning part about the gods mating with the daughters of man but "The Book" quickly lost its credibility for us when David, that guy who was immortalized in those renown words:

"I just washed my sling, and I can't do a fling with it".

I certainly could relate to that, at the beginning of a cycle race when the adrenalin started to pump it drains you of all energy and you wonder what the fuck you're doing there. The gun goes off and the magic kicks in. So it did with David when faced with Goliath, however after having got over his hero status he started knocking off a washer woman he had seen from the roof of his house, which wouldn't have been so bad except that he was married at the time--- it ruined the whole reverence. They should have fixed that part up when they were putting the bible together in the early 3 and 400's AD.

If this was an example of the revered Patriarchs of the bible we were appalled. I skipped thru a few pages and read about a God who wouldn't have any other god before him and we had to pray to him only. ???!!!! Wow! Was this the mighty omnipotent God whose own creations he wanted all to worship him and to slaughter all those who didn't? Was he that insecure and just a wee bit paranoid psychotic? Just a little? And judgmental too? God?

Our ship looked like it had been hit by a bomb, which was exactly what it felt like when that rogue wave, so tall that I had seen waterfalls thundering down its face as it took us in its maw and shook us like a water rat and all but turned us totally upside down before we were released to find ourselves, much to our surprise, still alive and still afloat...though still in serious danger. Highlight, in a word, was squalor. There was dampness and mess everywhere, and a foul smell. Even the matches were damp, and we couldn't light our kerosene stove to cook.

Eight hundred miles to go. Due north. Highlight steers herself to windward in moderate seas while we clean up a little, and we each have a sponge down. Change clothes and feel a lot better.

Three days of reasonable weather, then the wind and seas build up once again. We're back to the old pattern and up goes the storm gear.



David tending the halyard and me on the foredeck setting the storm jib, bare feet and no life lines

At one point we were all on the foredeck and David and I sent Pat back to get a spanner. It seems like hours go by and Pat hasn't come back. I go back aft and find him waking from a deep sleep in the cockpit. "What the flaming hell....." I begin to say and Pat chimes in "I slipped on the seat and ended up in the cockpit".

"Broke one of the steering wheel pins on the way down too I notice" I said

"Shit, that explains the sore rib...how long was I here?" replied Pat.

"Strewth Pat you've been out for hours, but that's OK we found this neat mermaid to talk to while you were gone."

Just as the storm gathers force David notices the yacht seems to be down on the port side, he lifts the port float hatch to find the compartment full of water, with bits of white foam buoyancy material bobbing around.

Also in there is our very drowned outboard motor.

The first thing is to get the water out of that float and make whatever repairs are possible. I turn the ship downwind, while Pat and David begin bailing with plastic

buckets. They have just got a couple of buckets of seawater out when the yacht seems to be gripped by a giant hand and hurtles forward.

I look at David; I see a stare of incredulity on his face as he looks up, behind me. It tells me we're in for it. The boat takes off like a bat out of hell. We surf faster and faster. I daren't look behind to see the size of it, or even look at the speedometer. Even though the boat seems to be tracking as if it is on rails I daren't let it have another option as we hurtle down the face of this monster. Out of the corner of my eye I notice David still in a trance- like state and Pat's mouth has dropped and that's enough of a clue as to what is going on. This is the longest wave we've ever been on. If we broach now that water-filled float will dig in and we've had it for sure. But hell. Somewhere beyond the fear it's exhilarating and the adrenalin is certainly pumping. If we came down here for that we certainly got it, all five yards. Or five hundred.

Eventually, the wave passes under us, and Highlight comes in to land and settles once more.

David comes over to relate what he saw. "I never saw the top of the wave, it just kept going up and another crest would appear and take over behind it. It was huge" Pat reinforced him saying, "God, you should have seen the size of that!" They were both beside themselves, repeating what they saw over and over. It had certainly made an impression on them.

We finally got the float bailed, took the engine into the cabin, and investigated the leak.

Water had got into the float when part of its foredeck had collapsed under the strain of water being forced between it and the overhanging part of the wing deck. We made temporary repairs with a towel and pieces of timber, and then hove to for the night.

The outboard motor was all clogged with pieces of the foam flotation material. It had even got into the passages of the engine; David stripped it on the cabin sole, rinsed the parts in fresh water and sprayed on drying agent. He

put it together making sure it was in top condition.

To me an engine is only good if it is completely reliable. If it doesn't start first time it can't be relied on and is just an awkwardly shaped piece of ballast it had to be overhauled and David was the right man for the job. But dismantling it down here in the Roaring Forties had not been seen in the cards. Once overhauled he gave it a quick run in the cockpit well to make sure and it started first pull.

At first light we're up making up a more permanent reinforcing repair to the float.



Me hurriedly cutting a length of timber to David's measurement before handing it to him up forward in the float. A black storm is fast approaching and we can only guess what it means. This is midday.

David goes below in the float bow and I cut pieces to his measurements and hand them down to him. Halfway thru the repair, I look up and on the horizon I see the blackest storm rolling in that I have ever seen. We hurry and just as we finish the fury of the squall hits.

The squall is really the precursor to another storm, the sixth since leaving New Zealand. That seems an age ago.

"All hands on deck" happened so often that we would dress to go on deck and then stand in line waiting for the first person to climb the companion way, duck under the dinghy on

the cabin top into the cockpit, that at one stage standing in the queue we finally saw the funny side of it. This was we found, our clue that we were on the way up. If only we could learn to see the funny side sooner, but that I too would learn. There was no more anxiety in storms now, we're old hands. Storms come and storms go, and we've got to sail in them because there is nothing else to sail in. In a light heart, up go the storm sails and off we go. North again.

On Friday, June 7, after being at sea more than three weeks, we got our second favorable wind. It came in westerly at first, then eased and backed to the south.

We get the jib and main down and put up the kite to make the most of it. There was even some sunshine. David takes a sun shot and works out a fix at 34 degrees 43 minutes south. We're getting there slowly. We get out all the wet clothes and damp bedding to air out in the sunshine. For once we forget Captain Watchlin's advice of "all washing forward of the main mast."



Drying out and David takes a sun shot with the sextant

That nice little southerly lasted nine hours, and then we were left flopping around in a windless ocean. Sitting below we could hear a curious ping, ping noise, and Pat went up yelling: "The boom- it's goin' mad."

The main boom had slipped its sheet and was swinging

wildly from side to side, bouncing off the shrouds on either side. It had nearly decapitated Pat as he poked his head above the dinghy over the companionway to see what was up. We thought it was funny. He didn't.

The wind eventually returned, from the northwest again, and while we were hoisting sail Pat noticed both the leeward mizzen shrouds hanging loose. We used the halyard and topping lift to replace them. If we were on the other tack we would have lost the mizzen mast.

The next thing to go was the mainsail. It tore across the head; further evidence of the beating the boat had taken in the past few weeks.

We no sooner did we have the main off and replaced with the storm trys'l than a 70-knot squall hit. It came in from west-nor-west, catching us on the beam, and instead of rounding up, the boat took off on a screaming reach. We all scrambled to get on deck and were nearly washed overboard by rain hitting with the force of a fire hose. Driving horizontally it spewed across seas whipping up white spindrift spewing it horizontally over the swell that it looked forebodingly like a tempest across an Antarctic ice flow. We got the rag down to sit it out.

Log:

Tuesday June 11: Hove to under storm number seven.

Wednesday June 12: Sky clear between heavy squalls, sea rough but we make progress once more. Never a let-up-fight, fight, and fight to windward. But David reckons only 100 miles to go.

Thursday June 13: Land about two miles away, sighted at dawn, Rapa, after 29 days, and the log reads 2945 miles.

"The blessing of the storm is it will take you to a new shore, and there are always new shores to be explored." - Ramtha.



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8.5 p

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David Pat and John on arrival at Rapa

Captains Log: Earth date 2010

I am possibly the only person who has seen and survived an encounter with a 60 foot or more vertical wall of water in a small yacht and survived.

Seamen on ships have been talking about sightings of these extremely high Freak Waves for eons, but to the shore bound 'Oceanographers' PhD's (Piled higher and deeper) they of course were seeing things and like the mermaids they are pure seaman's myth and fishermen's stories. Well, that was until the New Years wave of Jan 1st 1995 that hit the Draupner oil rig in the North Sea and was recorded at close to 30m. Scientists disbelieved it, as a wave that size should only happen once in every 10,000 years. Well, that is in the linear model that all shipping designers and physicists use. The incidence of a wave of that size happening was practically zero. To those disbelievers, Mother Nature sealed it once and for all. The Tourist ship "Caledonian Star" returning from the Antarctic Feb 2001 ran into a storm in an Antarctic gale with 30ft/12m seas when the first officer saw a mountainous wall of water one mile

Form

in the distance coming at them from a different direction, 30 degrees off the bow. He estimated the monstrous wall of water to be 30metres (100ft) in height (approximately the height of a 12 story building) The helmsman could not see the crest of the wave as the trough opened up in front of them and buried the bow into the sea. Even though the bridge deck was 100ft above sea level, the Sea hit with such force that it broke all the windows flooding the bridge and shattering all electronics. The 1st officer was washed across the bridge and ended up with the helmsman on top of him; he had to swim back to the controls. They were lucky for they still had their engines and they boarded up the windows and limped back to port. A few days later and not so lucky was the German cruise liner the MS Bremen with 137 tourists aboard also returning from the Antarctic in the south Atlantic. A 30 m wall of water hit them, all instruments short circuited, steering gear failed completely and the ship lay dead in the water and broadside to the waves exposing her vulnerable restaurant windows to breaking seas, If a breaking sea hit the windows the ship would have capsized. With air and water temperature at zero it was a race against time to get the engines repaired and started. The starter motor lay in pieces on the engine room floor and in those dark and rolling seas lashing the windows they got lucky and the engines started first time.

Within days apart both the Caledonian Star and the Bremen challenged everything known in the linear sine wave equation and blew the theories apart. What was up?

The answer lay in a completely different branch of science, the bizarre non-linear world where objects appear, and disappear.

In this strange new mathematical world completely different

Professor Al Osbourne, at the University of Turin in Italy is the leading world Mathematician - with 30 years experience where he found in the nonlinear Schrödinger equation in Quantum Mechanics a modified version which describes deep water waves. There he discovered a beast so powerful and devastating which was lurking in the background of randomness ready to break loose and destroy theories and held on to concepts that reputations and whole careers are built on.

Seems Rogue Waves are far more common than previously thought -no wonder the shipping industry loses 1 per week.

Even though the BBC documentary "Freak Wave" interviewed many of the ships captains and crew telling of 'A Wall of Water' 'Like the White Cliffs of Dover' the scientists could not accept the quantum leap and utter those seemingly impossible words 'A Wall of water' so replaced it with 'the Wave'. To them in their theory it is still impossible.

I don't think they really understood the weird world of Quantum mechanics and nature.

The fact that Ronald Warwick, captain of the cruise liner Queen Elizabeth 2 in an encounter in 1995 said of it "a great Wall of Water... it looked like we were going into the white cliffs of Dover" and others with similar descriptions did not deter the scientists one moment of still calling it a 'Breaking Wave'. Mariners really do know the difference between a breaking wave filled with air and a very unusual wall of Solid water. I think to the shore person it is still a fisherman's/sailors story and relegated to myth.

But wait. None of them mentioned the horrific noise the Freak Wave that we had uncounted makes no doubt because they were insulated from it on the bridge.

In a wave the water doesn't actually move, it's only the wave that moves, the water stays pretty much in the same place. But what if the whole thing is moving, as in a Wall of water traversing over the sea like a bulldozer on the rampage. What then? This opens up a whole new kettle of fish. A Wall of Water moving Hollis Hollis as one huge block and if it was like the one that hit the Caledonian Star it stayed in that configuration over a mile of water but in doing so there must be a tremendous weight of water screaming over the sea creating the "Freight Train" signature that I had heard. It just hangs there defying all their known linear physics but exists in the weird and wacky non linear world of Quantum Physics.



Bare in mind that a photo makes the wave look one third its size

So there..... water cascading down its face like stampeding 'white horses' with 'Mermaids' darting in and out yelling and screaming in delight. "For those in peril on the sea?