

Couple describe the lonely 'hell' of yacht drama

By HENRI du PLESSIS
Shipping Reporter

A CANADIAN couple have described the "hell" of watching ships go by as they drifted helplessly in the South Atlantic in a disabled yacht after pitchpoling twice in a storm.

An emotional Ms Lydia Gisela Wollersheim and her husband Mr George Steinicke described their nine-day ordeal when they arrived in Cape Town last night.

They were rescued by the Irvin and Johnson trawler, Afrikaner, whose crew spotted them on the edge of the fishing grounds 160 miles south-east of Cape Agulhas on Sunday.

Their severely damaged 16m ferro-cement yacht, Irene, was towed to Cape Town by I&J's Pioneer IV on Tuesday.

Tears flowed as the couple were reunited with friends and Canadian Consular officials.

Mr Steinicke embraced the Afrikaner's first mate, Mr Christie Caroline, calling him "My friend!"

"These are the people who saved us — they are the best!" he said.

Ms Wollersheim cried when she described how the yacht pitchpoled.

"It was hell — absolute hell!"

"The feeling of abandonment was terrible. Several ships sailed past ... We were screaming and shouting and fired flares to attract their attention, but they did not see us.

"We had no electricity and we could do nothing!"

She said they had sailed extensively and had rounded Cape Horn in a storm, "but never, never have we seen anything like this".

"Irene was very well-equipped — she floated like a duck around Cape Horn," said Mr Steinicke.

"We called on the radio after we first went over, but after the second time, the radio stopped working. We had no mast, no antennas and the water was everywhere in the boat.

"The hatch broke and was washed off and the water just streamed in," he said, tears pouring down his face.

The first time the boat pitchpoled, Ms Wollersheim was knocked unconscious and buried under debris.

Mr Steinicke revived her and she was on deck tying down gear when the yacht pitchpoled again.

"Fortunately, I was tied to a cleat with a safety line. I felt myself under water and held my breath ..."

On the third day adrift they wrote a "last message" on the bulkhead of the yacht.

"My wife did that just in case," said Mr Steinicke who spent 13 years building the yacht, using his life's savings.

"We had to stay positive — we had to keep going. Otherwise we would have been dead."

Mr Steinicke believed the yacht pitchpoled because steering gear broke.

"It will have to be investigated," he said.



Picture, PETER STANFORD, The Argus.

SURVIVORS: Standing on the bridge of the trawler, Afrikaner, rescued Canadian yachtsman Hans Steinicke, 70, waves cheerfully to watchers on the quay. The face of his wife, Ms Lydia Wollersheim, shows signs of their ordeal.