

The Queen's Birthday Storm

by Dominique R. Eustache



In June 1994, the 'Queen's Birthday' storm, swept the Pacific north of New Zealand - it was a four-day 'bomb' of huge seas and hurricane strength winds, and a fleet of 60 yachts lay in its path. The Eustache family, on their Morgan 43 sloop *Hippo's Camp*, were there - and this is their story.

Toll of the Storm

Seven boats were abandoned. One was lost with all hands (*Quartermaster*, a 40ft sloop from New Zealand with three persons on board). How fierce was the storm? We all like to put figures on wind force and wave height when recounting our adventures over and over again, comfortably seated in the Suva Yacht Club, sipping a cold Fiji Bitter. Several skippers reported 80-knot gusts and 15-metre waves (such as *Hearlight's*, shortly before the catamaran broke up and foundered). I can't really tell. At one point I simply stopped looking at the windmeter. As to the wave height, I personally find it hard to make an accurate estimate from the deck of a small vessel. Enough to say that we felt really tiny when they were towering above us.

What did we learn from this storm?

Preparedness is key: A boat venturing offshore must have all the necessary equipment to be self-sufficient. It would go beyond the scope of this article to give an exhaustive list - which could only be subjective anyway - of what you need 'out there' to face all eventualities. However, I would like to point out a few pieces of equipment that I was really glad we had during this storm:

* An inner forestay (with running backstays) that enabled us to use a hanked on staysail, and later a storm jib, rather than

a furling jib. By bringing the sail centre closer to the centre of gravity of the boat, we could balance the boat considerably better in high winds. Also, regardless of what furling manufacturers may claim, a furling system is a mechanism that can and will at the worst possible moment (rule of the sea!) fail, with potentially disastrous consequences for the rig and the boat as suddenly the whole jib rolls out in extreme wind conditions. In the survival mode, we personally preferred 'fail-safe' systems, hence the inner forestay that we added to *Hippo's Camp* when we were outfitting her. Whenever the wind increased over 35 knots, we always stopped using the furling jib and switched to the hanked-on staysail (stored in a sail bag on deck, already hanked on to the forestay and ready to be raised).

* Several foresails (of increasingly heavier fabric) that allowed us to modify the sail plan to meet the worsening conditions (from partially furled jib, we went down to staysail and eventually storm jib). We also had a storm trysail which we did not use during this storm (too much wind to set it up).

A drogue: When I bought it, it was more 'peace-of-mind' that I was buying than anything else! Honestly, I had no idea how it performed, but I had 'a drogue' and my pre-departure checklist was satisfied. Well, this strange-looking item did work and without it, we would have been left broadside to the seas, with the potentially hazardous consequences we all know.

A portable VHF: It does not seem like a priority item on a blue water cruiser! However, since I thought there was a distinct possibility of being rolled over and dismasted, I could not help but think that our portable VHF would come in handy to communicate with the rescue party. I

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guess this feeling must have come from following *Destiny's* rescue on channel 16 after they dismasted. The fact of the matter is that our portable VHF, which had been mostly buried somewhere down below and rarely recharged for four years, is now the object of considerably greater care!

Undoubtedly, modern technology has made our ventures offshore easier and, to a certain degree, safer. However, I am also under the impression that an undue amount of blind faith is put behind all the electronic wizardry that is now flourishing on yachts, and that a very false sense of safety is derived from it: When your boat becomes a nutshell in the eye of the storm, there is little that radar, GPS, SSB etc., will do to save your life.

We do carry a 406MHz EPIRB for example and we feel more secure to know that someone will almost immediately identify our position if we run into serious trouble. However, this feeling of safety is also somewhat fallacious, since extremely rough conditions can make our actual rescue impossible or delay it for hours (a whole night in the case of *Destiny* for example), which can be fatal. The tragedy of *Quartermaster* in this respect also clearly shows that state-of-the-art technology is not a guarantee of survival (their liferaft, including their activated 406MHz EPIRB, was found later on, but without any trace of the crew).

We also carry a life-raft which we almost lost in the storm. When we arrived in Suva, I found that one of the two heavy-duty quick-release nylon snaps which close the straps securing the liferaft to the deck had broken off, most likely the result of a breaking crest which attempted to carry the life-raft away. If I do not question the safety value of a life-raft in certain situations, I can flatly state that it would have been absolutely impossible for us to abandon the boat and board the life-raft with two young children in the conditions encountered.

Finally, one piece of equipment that I would qualify as perfectly useless in this storm is the weatherfax. On the day the storm hit, no weather bureau, with the exception of Fiji's, was aware of anything, and it was over 38 hours later that weather faxes started to indicate the low pres-



The Eustache family who were aboard Hippo's Camp during the frightening Queen's Birthday Storm.

sure system that was causing havoc between New Zealand and the tropics. I personally prefer a ham radio or simply a short wave receiver that allows you to tap into several weather sources. This diversification is quite useful since you'd be surprised at how often they seem not to agree with one another.

In this particular storm, it was thanks to Arnold and its 04h00 UTC daily weather report that we had exactly two hours to prepare the boat before the onslaught started. Also, meteorology is a very complex science in which experience plays a very important role. Therefore, I prefer to leave weather chart analysis to experts, or at least to people who, though not professional, have built up expertise through years of experience. On crossing between New Zealand and the tropics, we carefully monitor Arnold's Net (14 318.2MHz @ 04:00UTC), Keri Keri Radio (4445MHz SSB @ 06:00UTC) and Taupo Radio (6224MHz SSB @ 20:03UTC).

If having the appropriate – and operating – equipment is indispensable, knowing how to use it is of paramount importance. It is not when the wind blows 60 knots and the seas break that you start experimenting with different sail configurations for heaving to. It is absolutely critical to practise beforehand, in conditions still 'manageable', in order to determine what sail plan works best for your boat, up to which conditions of wind and seas. Replacing the staysail with the storm jib in 50 knots of wind was 'do-able' because we had done it before in easier conditions.

Our movements, our coordination

boom.

Gear-wise, we were prepared:

Separate track on the mast for the trysail; slides in position on the track and sail stored in a sailbag attached to the mast. Practice-wise, we were not! In conclusion, from theory to reality, there is a big gap, and only repetitive practice will allow you to bridge the two. Nobody comfortably tucked in a snug anchorage or in a marina when the weather report announces a strong wind warning or small craft advisory feels like going out to practise manoeuvring. But I can say from my own experience that you'll be happy you did it when you get into a serious blow 'out there'.

Once again, preparedness is key, both with the boat and the crew. Once upon a time, cruisers had to pay their dues before venturing offshore, namely in the form of having to learn celestial navigation to know where they were going. To master the sextant, the stars and the calculations would take them quite a while; to feel truly confident in their own abilities quite a while longer, and in the meantime, they'd garner years of experience at sea. When they would eventually cast off for good, they were prepared. GPS technology accessible to everybody for a few hundred dollars has waived these dues, making it an absolute necessity for most of us to be twice as alert!

Shortcomings of short-handed cruising

When you are sailing short-handed, decisions made are 'binding' - i.e. whatever course of action you decide had better



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The above pic shows how the sleeping quarters of Hippo's Camp were arranged for the children during the storm.

be the right one because you usually deplete all your energy putting it into action. Also, with a larger, experienced crew, you can conduct experiments and determine what works best. On the other hand, certain techniques cannot be resorted to for any period of time with insufficient manpower. That was my greater concern in the 'second' part of the storm after we'd taken the storm jib down and heaved the drogue. If this strategy had not worked as planned, we would have been in trouble. Exhaustion and hypothermia had taken their toll on me, and I seemed unable to think straight, let alone leave my bunk, don my harness and go back on deck.

Our situation would have become even more critical if one of us had been injured. Still, this experience does not make me a proponent of taking extra crew onboard, except when you know them extremely well (as sailors, as well as individuals), and have sailed with them extensively (so that they are fully familiar with your 'procedures' in any conditions).

We learned a lot from this storm, and I consider it a very valuable experience, if you are lucky enough to get out of it unscathed. I emphasize 'lucky' because I am convinced that it takes more than a well-found boat, state-of-the-art equipment and a highly experienced crew to weather such a storm. It also takes luck. Comparing experiences between *Destiny* and *Hippo's Camp* clearly illustrates this fact: Only miles apart, with very similar boats and equipment, after having cruised the same cruising grounds, *Hippo's Camp* made it while *Destiny* sank.

After four years of blue water sailing and over 20,000 miles, we could not help but feel confident in our ability to be always in control, and over-confidence (the mother of negligence) was only a few steps away. This storm came to be an extremely convincing reminder of our frailty in the fury of the elements and that we must be prepared at all times to face such conditions.

Talking of the hazards of being 'over-confident', a word about regatta cruising, which seems to attract a greater number of yachties in various places of the world every year. If I do find it fun to buddy-boat with a number of friends from one island to the other, I also find cruising in a regatta quite heretical for blue water passages. Clever marketing induces the belief that in a group there is more safety at sea, and leads certain yachties to become over-confident and undertake offshore journeys for which they may be ill-prepared, and would not undertake on their own otherwise.

Beware - in extreme conditions, it could not be less true! There is not much you can do for others, or others do for you, when all are fighting for their own survival. I am absolutely convinced that if someone had raised a "Mayday" even one mile away from us while we were in the heart of the storm, we would have been totally unable to do anything to help. Furthermore, it becomes quite dangerous to have so many boats in immediate vicinity of each other when conditions worsen: Nobody is on the look-out anymore, and a collision in very high seas would certainly be fatal. ⚓

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