

The Night of the Big Storm

By Terry Clark

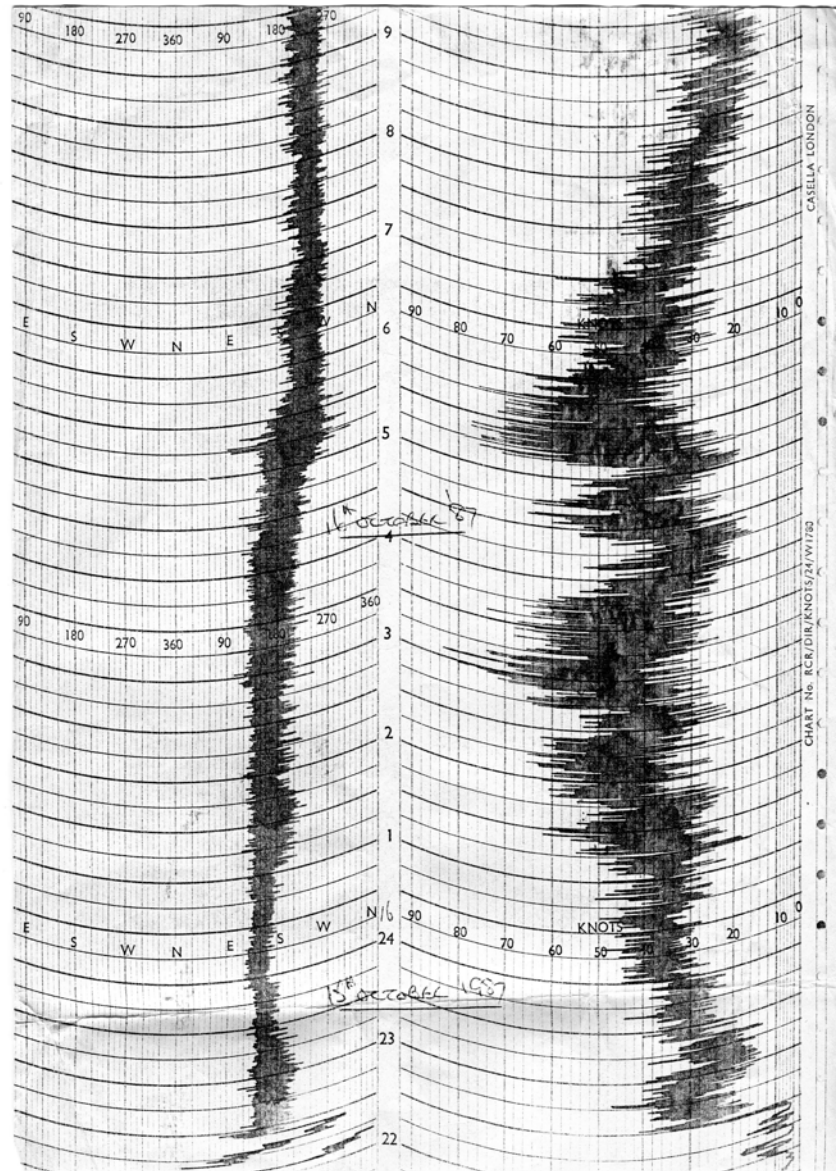
I was a Marine Officer with ABP for fourteen years before being authorised as a Southampton Pilot in 1990. I retired in 2002.

On the night of October 15th 1987, I was the duty Marine Officer onboard ABP's Harbour Patrol launch in Southampton, all set for another 12 hour night watch as the floating extension of the Port Authority's VTS system, then still known as SPR (Southampton Port Radio).

The watch started quietly enough and we proceeded on the routine nightly inspection of the lights, buoys and other navigational aids. Just before 2230 a strong Southerly wind set in and at the same time we were instructed to proceed to the Netley anchorage where a small freighter, the *Sam G*, appeared to be dragging her anchor, SPR being unable to raise her on the VHF. We made all sorts of noise with our whistle and finally resorted to banging on the hull with a hammer before faces appeared over the gunwhale. We advised the Master to contact SPR on the radio and overheard him dismiss their fears, assuring them that everything was OK. We resumed our routine patrol and the wind increased steadily.

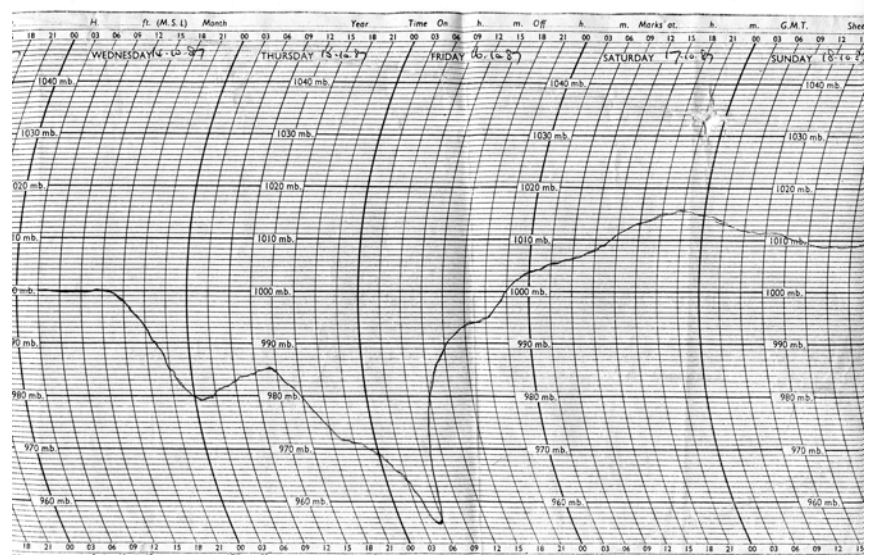
At 0110 we returned to stand by the *Sam G*, now dangerously close to the Netley shore and hollering for a Pilot. During this excitement we were obliged to return to the Marine Base at 25 berth, where one of our own craft was reported adrift. It turned out to be the *Naomi*, the Mooring Officers work-boat. *Naomi* had started out as a luggage boat for the flying boats of Aquila Airways and we were pleased to be able to re-secure her safely and check the other craft at Marine Base.

On returning to the Netley anchorage we found that a Pilot, Gordon Thornton, had been able to board the *Sam G*, but having no time to recover the port anchor and cable which by then had all been laid out, he slipped the cable at the bitter end from inside the chain locker at 0220 and made for sea. Unfortunately, as he



Above, the wind speed and direction as recorded at Southampton Port Radio (now VTS). The maximum recorded was 83 knots shortly after 0300 but I believe more than a hundred was showing at Fawley at that time.

The barograph, below, recorded a low of 956 mb. at 0530 when the wind was still reaching nearly 80 knots.



passed Fawley, the wind piped up so strong that he made more lee-way than head-way and clipped the south end of Hamble oil jetty with his stern. This had the effect of canting the stern into the wind so Gordon tried full astern into the wind but achieved not much more than going aground on Hamble Spit at a much reduced rate. It is ironic that when Gordon was a pre-sea cadet at Warsash in 1953 he gained some fame by putting Wally Wakeford's gig aground just before the Lord Mayor was about to board it. This time he ended up about 100 yards away from the spot of his previous notoriety 34 years before. You could say that he was, at least, consistent.



The Sam G, minus the port anchor, aground on Hamble Spit. BP jetty behind and Fawley on the other side of Southampton Water.

By this time we were off the Royal Pier observing the *Cowes Castle* whose forward lines had parted. And that was as much as we could do, observe. There is, after-all, a limit to what two men in a 42ft GRP launch are prepared to do in 70 knot winds. I advised SPR of the situation and hurried to the River Itchen to seek shelter. We had hardly got above the Itchen Bridge when we received a plea from SPR asking if we were prepared to embark a Pilot and take him down to Fawley where a VLCC was breaking free from No.5 berth! The Southampton based Pilot boat was at that time single manned and in light of the deteriorating conditions it was deemed unsafe for the cox'n there to attempt the task on his own. So at 0330 we were bouncing up and down alongside the *S.H.B. Seahorse* at Marine Base, endeavouring to embark Pilot John Crowder. While doing so we were in a grand position to see one of Bowker & King's

bunker barges detach itself from 22/23 berth and head North across the Empress Dock towards 26/27 berth. Another craft bound for a lee shore! Our priority was to get to Fawley so we could do nothing to assist.

Our trip down the main channel was fraught with unexpected hazards. Yachts and other small craft that had been securely moored in the Hythe area had been jerking and straining at their moorings and dragging them into the deeper water where they were then free to drift across the channel until those same under-slung moorings brought up again in the shallow water on the Weston and Netley shores. Those were the lucky ones; the unlucky ones fell foul of the U.S. barges and their moorings at the DARSA base at Hythe.

John Crowder was understandably eager to make all haste to Fawley but with severely restricted visibility in the by now 90 knot winds I was reluctant to push too fast through the line of unmanned and unlit yachts crossing our course. It was forty-five minutes before we were alongside the *Captain John G.P. Livanos* off Fawley, a journey that would normally take about twenty. There was a ladder over the starboard (windward) side but one of the big tugs was able to make a lee for us so that the Pilot was able, at some risk to himself, to scramble aboard.

The tanker, of 259,646 tons deadweight and 331.69 metres long, had been secured starboard side to (head out) at No.5 berth, discharging crude. The discharge pipes would have been disconnected as a routine safety measure several hours earlier when the wind got up, so no pollution risk there. The immediate, and very real, danger was that the tugs would not be able to hold her and she would fetch up on the Hamble Spit, alongside the *Sam G*. The possible consequences of a partly loaded VLCC grounding outside one of the world's most famous and crowded yacht havens is the stuff of Harbour Masters' nightmares. On the bridge of the *Sam G*, as they watched the unfolding drama, the West Indian Captain turned to Gordon Thornton and said, "Dat dam big bugger, he come to join us, man". Luckily, there had been a North Sea Pilot already on board the VLCC, ready to take her on to her next port, and this gentleman had taken charge as soon as she began to break free from her berth. On the arrival of John Crowder the two of them managed to



The Captain John G.P. Livanos

conduct the vessel safely out to sea, which feat was subsequently recognised in the form of a significant salvage award.

Elsewhere in the Port area, other vessels were also experiencing problems in the extreme conditions. Choice Pilot Tony Howard had managed to board the in-bound P&O container ship *Osaka Bay* at around mid-night out at the Nab and after consulting with the Master immediately ordered two extra tugs. By the time they were past the Sturbridge the vessel was proving difficult to steer and they prudently decided to abort their berthing plans. Captain Jim Thomson was reluctant to attempt to turn round and head back to sea so they managed to get the way off the ship and anchored in the vicinity of S.E. Ryde Middle, a full 10 shackles out on the starboard and 6 on the port. The vessel ended up with both anchors streaming out on the starboard beam but dragging them back the way that they had just come. During the rest of the night they battled to get the head round and the weight off the anchors, the engines being almost constantly in use. It was not until around 0600 with the wind starting to moderate, that they were able to get her head to wind, by which time they were back at the Sturbridge, having dragged nearly two miles.

That expected arrival and subsequent aborting of the *Osaka Bay* was very fortuitous as far as the *Captain John G. P. Livanos* was concerned. The two tugs stationed at Fawley would have been unable to hold her on their own and had the docks tugs for the container ship not been pre-ordered and already manned up then it is doubtful that their crews would have been able to get in at a later stage what with fallen trees blocking many roads by then. As it was they were able to respond as soon as the moorings started to part, making all haste to Fawley.

It was not generally realised locally just how close to disaster the port had been. I never saw a report of it in the newspapers, whose pages seemed to be dominated by pictures of fallen trees. The only book about the Big Storm that I subsequently read mentioned the bunker barge going adrift in the Empress dock but not the VLCC from Fawley. And that little episode had a finale that will bring a rueful smile to the faces of cynical sailors like me. The bunker barges were normally secured at the end of their day and left unmanned overnight. However, on this occasion there was an engineer sleeping on board. He was in the habit of having a beer or three after work and if he felt he had drunk too much to drive home he would return to the vessel and doss down there, all unofficial of course. The story is that he awoke in the middle of the night, realising that something was wrong. Going on deck he found the vessel in the middle of the dock just as the stern light of our Southampton Patrol launch was disappearing out of the entrance. Being a resourceful chap and an all-round seaman he prepared some fenders for a hard landing and dropped the port anchor at just the right time to arrest the bow. He secured the vessel safely as she came alongside and congratulated himself on a job well done. And that was all the congratulations that he did get, for when his owners found out that he had been sleeping on board, what he got from them was a rollicking!

On the SP we finally found shelter at about 0500 in the River Itchen, where we spent a couple of restful hours tucked up alongside Drivers Wharf by Northam Bridge before returning to Marine Base for change of watch. On the way home I was surprised at the amount of debris in the streets and wondered what had been going on. It was only when watching the early evening news after spending the day in bed that I realised the extent of the storm and its effects around the county. No mention of that VLCC though!