

In the wake of the recent violent storms it is, of course, typical of old sailors to recall even greater events that happened in 'their' day. In the absence of any other contributions to this journal I bring to you two such recollections of The Great Storm of '87.

The first from Cdr P.C. Tambling RD, who was the Port Manager and Harbour Master at Weymouth at the time.*

The second from your editor, which account has previously appeared in The Master Mariners of Southampton, edited by Simon Daniels.

So settle back while we empty our sea boots, wring out our socks and regale you with tales of a storm of yesteryear.

The October 15th 1987 Hurricane.

Memories of the Events leading up to and including the passing of the eye of the storm over Weymouth

On Monday 12th October, the Met Cell at HMS Osprey on Portland phoned me to give their advance warning of an approaching hurricane which they had been plotting as the eye of the storm developed in the Bay of Biscay. A calculation had been made as to the timing of the Storm Centre passing over Ushant, and the estimated course and timing of a likely landfall in the Portland Bill area.

Laid-up on the No.1 berth for the Winter period was M.V. "Portelet", whose Agents were Denholm' of Glasgow. She had operated the Channel Island route from Weymouth for British Channel Island Ferries Ltd. for the summer season. Owned by Marlines of Greece as the "Baroness M", she was originally the P& O RoRo ferry "Lion", running out of Dover. There were only three stand-by crew aboard.

We watched the storm through Tuesday and on Wednesday I took legal advice from the well known legal author on Harbour and Pilotage Law, and Legal Advisor to the British Ports Association, Mr. Richard Douglas in London. As the vessel was likely to be in danger of parting her moorings should the storm proceed as forecast over the Western Approaches from Ushant, it was vital to have sufficient crew aboard in case of *Portelet* breaking adrift due to a heavy swell or Gale/Hurricane force winds.

Mr Richard Douglas advised me how to issue a Harbour Master's Directive which I followed in detail by telephoning the vessel's Agents in Glasgow who had initially refused to agree. This Directive was confirmed by facs. message and a copy published in the local press in addition to placing a Public Notice in my Office Notice Board on Custom House Quay, for sufficient crew to be aboard by 2000 next evening.

After considerable protesting by the Agents, they advised me that there would be sufficient crew aboard by my requested time, saying that no hurricane was expected.

As far as I understand the issuing of a Harbour Master's Directive is rarely used, which I discovered later when Chairman of the Small Ports Section of the BPA in 1992.

I visited the vessel at 2000 to satisfy myself that my instructions had been carried out. All was well and I went home. The skies were completely overcast with the strong South Easterly wind continuing as it had been for several days resulting in a heavy swell running across the beaches.

At 0320 next morning my telephone rang, and it was the *Portelet's* master asking me to supply two tugs as he was struggling to hold his ship alongside the quay. He was told that in no circumstances would an MOD tug be available, and on leaving my house it was blowing a full storm from the East. Eventually after avoiding many fallen trees, I arrived alongside the ferry to find one bow rope parted, the gangway fallen off the quay and stuck between the hull and quay piles. She was being held off the quay using both engines and bow-thrust. The port engine was turning Half Ahead and starboard unit at Slow Astern with full thrust on the bow unit to the quay.

Portalet stayed in this mode for several hours until the eye of the Storm passed overhead at 0450, when the wind swung round to the WSW blowing at what must have been force 12+. (There was no National Coast Watch lookout on Portland Bill in those days to record wind strengths!) The easterly heavy swell which had been running during the previous ten hours had been flattened as smooth as a sheet of glass. The spume carried off the waves made a fantastic sight looking towards the coast off Lulworth Cove at sunrise.

In Portland that was another story altogether.

Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) had ordered the total evacuation of his port on the Thursday afternoon. All the fleet under work-up training sailed as instructed with exception the German Cruiser "Schleswig Holstein", whose Admiral refused to sail.

Eventually the Naval Attache from the Embassy in London was called and briefed by FOST.

On boarding the German vessel, the German Naval Attache in company of FOST, told his Admiral that the German Government were paying a vast sum of money to bring his vessel up to operational strength following a major refit. If FOST

had ordered his vessel to go to sea for the safety of his vessel and crew, to sea he must go, and to sail immediately.

Obviously I cannot print the verbal exchange that took place, but to say it was heated is an understatement of facts.

Schleswig Holstein sailed to join the fleet which was hove-to in the English Channel all night.

The Fleet returned at 1100 to Portland in line ahead, with the German warship at the tail end.

There was a knock on FOST's Office Door at 1500 ,when the German Admiral presented himself to apologise !

Many small boats vanished during that storm never to be seen again.

I have scanned the Barograph recording taken at Winfrith which was presented to me later as a souvenir. This shows the fantastic rise/fall during the night of 15th & 16th October 1987 when the barometric graph ran off the paper as the storm passed overhead in a forty minute period. Winfrith estimated the barometric reading at the centre of that hurricane was 935 mb.

Those are my memories of the 87 Storm

P.C.Tambling



Portelet in Weymouth Harbour in '88