Through the Eye of the Storm Aboard *VIKING*

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The August weather couldn't have been nicer the day we set sail: enough wind to gently fill the sails of our 46' sloop rigged sailboat, *VIKING*. The blue, blue sky and white, puffy balls of cottony clouds were a perfect send-off. Our adventure, the return leg of an offshore cruise from Ocean City, N.J. to St. Petersburg, Fl. seemed to be getting off to a fantastic start. If only we had known what was in store! Spirits were high, as the getting underway chores were cheerfully accomplished. We waved to the small boat sailors we passed enroute to the Atlantic. They looked at us a trifle wistfully --there is always something mystical about going down to sea in wooden ships. Our crew, with the exception of myself as captain, was unseasoned, but it was the time in each of our lives for an honest-to-goodness-- adventure -- the kind that one always daydreams about, but usually ends up reading in a book. After all, it takes courage to embark on a voyage of this magnitude - to forsake friends and family for the unknown. Others aboard recalled the traffic jams, and over-priced crowded shopping centers, and thought, “Surely life is more than this.” So we returned to primitive conditions: kerosene lanterns, no running water and no air conditioning. To us, however, the trade was well worth it.

We opted to sail offshore: taking the safe inland waterway was not feasible, as *VIKING* is powered only by sail. Without an engine, it would have been impossible to negotiate the many bridges and narrow waterways.

As it was hurricane season, the crew regularly monitored the hourly marine weather broadcasts in order to learn the position of any tropical storms or hurricanes so that we could either run to a harbor for shelter or take early evasive action at sea so as not to intersect a storm's path.

After passing offshore of Chesapeake Bay, three fearsome capes that had wrecked many stout vessels must be rounded. The chart is covered with symbols marking the position of their wrecks. The first is Hatteras, nicknamed “the graveyard of the Atlantic.” Shivers ran-up and down our spines as the chart showed Cape Lookout, Cape Fear and Frying Pan Shoals must be dealt with, should we be lucky enough to successfully round Hatteras. Prudence required staying at least 50 miles offshore of these capes, as shoals extend many miles seaward and we didn't want to be washed ashore and wrecked during foul weather. Encountering a severe storm would render retreat to harbors in that area hazardous at best. Hurricanes send out vanguards of huge waves far in advance of their arrival which break, creating surf that would make entering those shallow and unprotected harbors impossible. Another reason for our great offshore distance was the ever-present Gulf Stream. It is a powerfu1 ocean current flowing north through the Florida Straits, sweeping up the Atlantic Coast just offshore of the three fearsome capes. As our maximum speed is about 9 mph, any current that would detract from our progress should be avoided: hence we found ourselves about 100 miles from shore beyond the Gulf Stream’s influence.

As we were about to round Hatteras, Hurricane Belle was approaching the southern tip of Florida. We beat a hasty retreat to Chesapeake Bay. In two days we sailed nearly 200 miles to a harbor of refuge on the Potomac River and had just dropped anchor when Hurricane Belle shrieked by the

mouth of the Chesapeake, only eight hours behind us. We heaved a sigh of relief, having come so close to disaster, yet escaping unscathed.. After a few days of rest we set sail again, thinking that we had had our “big hurricane adventure" and that we could continue, on our peaceful trip.

After clearing the Chesapeake, we put far out to sea again to sail south offshore of the Gulf Stream, certain that we could either avoid any new storms or have a few days warning to find a safe harbor. Weighing heavily in that decision was the fact that tropical storms and hurricanes usually form in the Caribbean Sea many hundreds of miles away from our route. If one was to cross our route, we could have adequate warning of its approach. These storms typically move at 15 to 25mph. Even under optimal conditions, we cannot outrun a storm, unless we have a big head start.

On the afternoon of the 19th of August, 1976 *VIKING* was sailing gloriously. Our bellies full and spirits soaring from a fish recently speared from the bow, we surged through the deep blue waters. The gentle rocking of the boat was a comforting cradle. We were at one with the sea. The wind freshened, making us giddily in love with life itself. Spray and spume were flying through the air, occasionally drenching the helmsman. "Just wait,” Bill said, “you’ll get yours." But it was jovial laughter that accompanied the threat, not anger. “Aw, shut up and 'steer the boat," cried Buddy, who was busily engrossed in a novel. “Y’all be nice up there or nobody gets to eat," came Betsy's voice from the galley, from which the aroma of good seafaring chow was emanating. Amid the joking, laughter, and light banter arose a growing concern over the increasing wind and great swells from the east. At first, nobody said anything. In an engineless sailboat, going full speed is better than getting your brains baked in a flat calm. Besides, we were exuberant over the prospect of having a chance to sail as much as 200 miles in a single day. Then Buddy commented on what was all on our minds. “Sure wish I had a surfboard out here. Could go a long way on those waves.” His arm mimicked a surfboard, scudding about. Then Betsy yelled from below “Hey, you guys; can the noise. I am listening to the weather on WWV down here The signal's weak and I need all the help I can get to hear the blasted thing. I wish they'd repeat their forecasts after they give them. It gives me the creeps to just barely hear half of what they’re saying and then have to worry about the rest!” With that, the crackling intensified, just as the far-away voice began to warn of storms at sea. The voice was grave as we all strained to hear, frowns of concern replacing our smiles “... a new tropical storm, named Dottie... formed in the Florida Keys ... is presently offshore of Ft. Lauderdale, FL and moving...” “Moving where?” I screamed at the radio. But an atmospheric disturbance drowned out the rest of the information. Oh, if only they ran the forecasts more than once an hour!

A designation of a tropical storm means that the winds have already reached gale force, and could be as high as 75 mph, at which time it would become, a full-fledged hurricane. As I was familiar with weather patterns, I. gravely informed the rest of the crew that regional weather systems would bring it sweeping up the coast right into our path. So that was where those big swells were coming from! The wind grew stronger moment by moment. "Betsy, take the wheel.", I barked. "Bill, go forward and drop the jenny. Buddy, you and I will lower the mainsail. The words were tersely spoken, and my crew knew there was no time for backtalk, even in jest, when the words came out so clipped. The need to reduce sail was apparent to all by this time. We were dreadfully over-canvassed, making *VIKING* heel over on her side at a precarious angle. Apprehension which was to shortly change to fear, began to show on the crew. Betsy, grinning only a few hours before as we surfed gleefully down the big swells, grimaced, gripping the wheel, as the weather broadcast the next hour confirmed that Dottie was indeed headed our way. We knew she was getting close. The wind was steadily increasing and the waves now taking on fearsome proportions. Escape was out of the question. Dottie was almost upon us.

We immediately began to prepare *VIKING* for extreme severe weather. As Bill steered, Buddy and Betsy carried all the removable gear below, and I lashed our lifeboat more securely to the foredeck, muttering, "Sure hope we won't need you, *LITTLE VIKING*". Emergency pumps were readied. We donned safety harnesses which were secured to a line running from the cabin below, and forward to the bow so that we could move about the now violently heaving boat while tied to it. A hot meal was prepared below, no small feat in itself, as we were pitching and rolling heavily. We ate in silence, no one daring to verbalize what we were all thinking, that this may be our last meal. We then finished stowing everything in the cabin, lashing gear in place where practical and jamming other stuff as best we could so that we could get knocked on our side without too much danger from flying objects. Before long the wind had risen to the point where we had successively reduced sail to only a tiny 140 sq. ft. jib, only twice the size of a tiny Sunfish sail. Ordinarily, we carry nearly 1000 sq. ft. The boat was flying through the water and surfing down the great swells. The wind howled about us as dusk set in. We screamed to be heard, while only feet away from each other.

Only last year I finished my Ph.D. in Marine Geology with research on waves and currents. My expertise in oceanography was certainly needed now. As calmly as possible, I told the crew that we were in the dangerous semicircle of the storm. I explained the winds in a tropical storm spiral in toward the center from right to left until they just whirl around and around in a ferocious circle just outside of the eye, a zone of near calm about 20 to 50 miles in diameter. We were on the right front side of the storm in its direction of travel and could escape only if we could sail nearly directly into the gale force winds and tremendous seas. Impossible! Carry sail? In this wind? By this time the wind had intensified to such a point that carrying even our little patch of sail was straining *VIKING* to her utmost. We realized the inevitable: we must take the sail down and attempt to run downwind under bare poles. We prayed the storm would leave us before we made landfall. And the sooner through the storm the better; tropical storms usually build in strength over

water. If we could struggle to the left rear corner of the storm, the winds would weaken and blow in a direction which would permit our escape.

The weight of the decision to head for the eye of the storm bore down heavily on me, as I was making decisions which would, perhaps, determine whether or not we would live or die. Troubled thoughts ran through my mind. These people are my friends. As captain, their lives are my responsibility, a duty I don't take lightly. I had lured them aboard with tales of adventure on the high seas. Would their lives be the price they would have to pay? Well, those are things to contemplate, but for now, I must concentrate fully on what is going on about us. The violent pitching of the boat made it impossible for anyone to sleep. Cooking was out of the question. Terror replaced hunger. Exhaustion had begun to set in and morale was at a low ebb. Buddy was sure we were all going to die. Flanked by optimistic Bill on one side and a confident Betsy on the other, he gravely instructed them to say final goodbyes to his mother and girlfriend, if one of them should miraculously make shore. I shared his pessimism, but dared not express my abject terror to the rest of the crew. Weren't captains those brave souls who shunned lifeboats and went down with the ship? I forced my jumbled mind to clear. "My decisions are vital more than ever." I had to rethink each one, as the torrential rains, the unceasing howling of the wind, the waves drenching us regularly, the lack of sleep, the totality of what a dim situation we were in, and the ever increasing violent heaving of the boat made it nearly impossible to think clearly.

I checked with Bowditch, the seaman's Bible, about the arrival of a tropical storm and read, "... the day becomes very dark, squalls become virtually continuous, and the barometer falls precipitously, with a rapid increase in wind speed. The center may still be 100 to 200 miles away in a fully developed tropical cyclone. As the center of the storm comes closer, the ever-stronger wind shrieks through the rigging and about the super-structure of the vessel. As the center approaches, rain falls in torrents. The wind fury increases. The seas become mountainous. The tops of huge waves are blown off to mingle with the rain and fill the air with water. Objects at a short distance are not visible. Even the largest and most seaworthy vessels become virtually unmanageable, and may sustain heavy damage. Less sturdy vessels do not survive." Bowditch was talking about ships and we were about to do battle with a tropical storm in a leaky, 30 year old wooden sailboat. *VIKING* was being strained to the limits. Even under bare poles, we were surfing down the huge waves. at breakneck speed. She was taking the waves nicely from astern, lifting up and then surging forward. No roller coaster created by man could equal our wild ride. Could *VIKING* endure? Could we? We were a sorry sight. Garbed in yellow slickers and pants, we appeared as soggy ducks, battered about in a merciless sea. *VIKING* seemed to be holding her own, as if to say, "If you guys can make it through, I won't let you down."

Our greatest fear was that we would run aground on the Florida coast during the height of the storm. It had been several days since we had clear skies and the chance to determine our exact position from the sun, moon, or stars. We were sailing almost due west, racing towards Florida. Our radio bearings seemed to indicate that we had ample sea room, but the bearings were crude, obtained by rotating the whole radio to find the quiet zone pointing toward the general direction of the transmitter. We sustained bruises as we were hurled like rag dolls about the cabin. Exhaustion had made it nearly impossible to accomplish even simple tasks. Yet the job of steering continued. The helmsman, secured with a safety harness so as not to be washed overboard clung to the wheel with both hands. Rough as it was, and much as the rest of us infinitely preferred being below, the helmsman was kept company on deck.

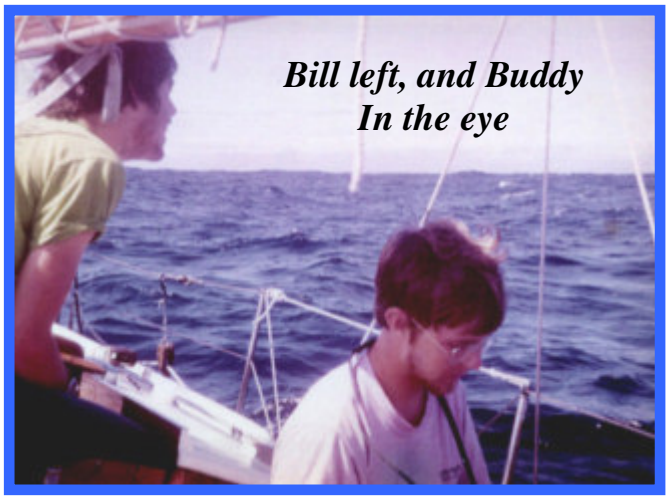
Keeping watch was crucial, as we could sometimes see the horizon when cresting the mountainous seas. Suddenly Buddy hollered out, “I think I see a light off to port.” Betsy anxiously peered in the direction he indicated. Black, churning nothingness. She mustered all her strength and cautiously inched herself to a standing position, clutching the rigging wires. The force of the wind blew dangerously hard against her fragile frame, as she strained to confirm Buddy's sighting; although a light meant life, it also meant bad news for us, no matter what form it took. Could anyone else be at sea in this tempest? Then, faintly, but there, yes, a light. "I see it too, Buddy. Richard, hit the deck!! There's someone else out here." Buddy needed all his concentration to steer. Betsy and I scanned the dark crashing waves, trying to interpret the light. Another voyager? A rescuer? Heaven forbid, land? "I see two lights. One’s blue. Getting closer.” Our binoculars were useless from the spume and the motion. “And a red light, and more blue lights.” “What?” “I said more lights. See?” We were fast coming upon a myriad of lights, like no ship's lighting system we had ever before encountered. “Land”, I dismally thought. “We're all going to die. The boat will break up in the surf and we probably can't swim the half mile or so to shore through pounding surf.” As I recollected later... I had prepared myself for the possibility of death that night. And so calm when death appeared ready to strike. Funny, no memory pictures reeling lickety-split through my mind; no thoughts of things left undone, just quiet and resolute inside. But somehow it didn't quite feel like this was “it!” The lights loomed larger and more varied in number and color. Could it be a ship? It was impossible to hear her engines. We had to scream just to hear each other. Closer and closer they came. Within minutes, a huge ship that could have only been an aircraft carrier slowly crossed our bow and passed about 200 yards to starboard. We do not know if they ever saw us. We really did not want to be seen for fear that a ship might try to rescue us and crush us like an eggshell in the process. There was a mixed feeling of relief and of loneliness when it slowly passed from sight steaming straight into the wind away from the path of the storm while we, caught in its grasp, must sail into its worst.

The wind and seas continued to build through the night. Dawn finally came. We could see fragments of the wild ocean through which we were sailing. The greenish blue water was turgid. It frothed and foamed as the tops of the waves broke, releasing angry energy. We were too tired to do more than hang on and take turns steering. Exhaustion and depression were taking over and we needed a lift badly. We had been getting new positions on the storm over the radio and continued to steer for the reported position of the eye.

Out of nowhere about 25 dolphins appeared. These marine mammals are among the most intelligent beings on earth. The dolphins repeatedly swam in unison the length of *VIKING* on the port side and, made a hard left turn at the bow. They repeated this strange maneuver time and time again. I remembered an account of how dolphins had used the identical tactic to steer Bernard Moitessier clear of reefs in the south Pacific Ocean. Consulting Bowditch again, I determined from the wind direction that the dolphins were leading us to the eye of the storm. They wanted us to turn and follow them!! I returned to the deck to find them repeating their strange behavior. We brought the boat around and put the wind on our port quarter as Bowditch (and the dolphins) had advised. As soon as we completed the turn, the dolphins disappeared.

We have had dolphins come to us many times and play by the boat or surf on its bow wave but never before have they told us how to steer.

It was the lift we so desperately needed. Somebody or something knew that we needed help and the dolphins came. Suddenly we had renewed energy. In 2 hours we penetrated the eye of the storm. It was paradise amidst hell. The sky was clear with both the sun and moon out. Making use of our good fortune, I quickly fixed our position with celestial navigation by observations of the sun and moon and calculated, much to our relief, that we had plenty of sea room left to ride out the rest of the storm. There was only a gentle breeze of about 10 mph blowing and calm seas. We had to go to nearly full sail to move the boat when only an hour before we were screaming along with no sail up in 60 mph winds. A few birds were flying about. All around us, for perhaps a distance of 20 miles were black swirling cumulo nimbus clouds: we were in the middle of a large, black doughnut. In the very center of the eye white, wispy clouds were swirling upwards like a funnel.



Bill left, and Buddy In the eye

The dolphins had literally saved our lives. We couldn't have endured much longer. They took us to a place of solitude where we could re-stow the boat, assess our (luckily nonexistent) damages, eat a hot meal and get about an hour of desperately needed sleep. I was below getting some rest when the cabin was suddenly filled with a sound like hundreds of fishing reels clicking. I charged up to the deck to find that we were surrounded by 50 or 100 dolphins behaving as we had never seen before. They were talking their heads off and lazily swimming along with us at our now very slow speed. They were not at their usual play, tails flipping, playing tag, swimming around, under the boat and each other, now a flank going off a hundred yards, now charging in again. No, instead they remained in the same position relative to the boat, lolling alongside. They sometimes turned on their sides, looking up at us with one eye. Usually they are gone in 15 to 20 minutes but they stayed with us for hours. Betsy recognized the chewed-up fin of one who had guided us to the eye a few hours before. We talked with them and felt a real sense of belonging and friendship between man and animal, both air breathers in the midst of a storm at sea. A small land bird huffed an puffed his way to the boat. After trying various places on deck, he decided that he would like to travel on a shelf in the cabin. We welcomed him and told him that we would gladly help him through the storm if he was smart enough to stay with us. He accepted a little water from Betsy.

Toward late afternoon we began to reach the far side of the eye. We were now in good spirits, and knew that we could probably handle the weak side of the storm after we had survived its strong side. As we approached the wall of the eye and began to reduce to storm sail again, the dolphins

who were still with us tried to get us to turn back (in a similar manner as before) into the safety and peace of the eye. We knew that the storm would only be getting stronger and since it could move faster than we, it would eventually overrun us in any case. It was time to escape while we could.

The change in wind and wave intensity from the calm of the eye as one sails through the eye wall into the storm is incredible. A curtain of torrential rain raged toward us. Then, only a few hundred yards separated us from the storm seas. Within moments we were once again plunged into hell. We reduced to our small storm jib and went crashing through the waves with deck plunging into the sea to the cabin sides on every wave.

In a few hours the wind and seas began to subside and by mid evening on the 20th we were clear of Dottie. All except the helmsman fell into bunks and slept as if dead. We awoke to a beautiful day. It was sunny and warm, a vivid contrast to our ordeal. Was that only yesterday? We rested, ate, and dried out the heaps of wet gear. The cabin had been drenched. The deck took on a circus atmosphere – with the appearance of soaked towels, clothes, bedding, and the lightheartedness of the crew. It felt wonderful to be alive that day.

Our flying passenger decided to leave and sadly flew away to the east, away from land. What a pity to have carried him through the storm only to have him fly out to sea and die.

The following day, August 22, 1976, we made landfall and sighted the huge missile gantries at Cape Canaveral. Our great adventure was over. Not one of us would have ever chosen to sail through a tropical storm at sea or would ever choose to do so again, but neither would we want to have missed such a rare experience of living.