

WEATHER – A MARITIME DICTATOR

*Driven ashore by gale force winds and huge seas after suffering machinery failure in September 2001 at Scarborough, about 26 nautical miles south of Cape Town, the bulker **Ikan Tanda** was refloated by Smit's **Wolraad Woltemade** on 17 October 2001. Badly damaged, she was scuttled about 200 nautical miles off the South African coast.*

Photograph : Andrew Ingpen, Ocean Images Cape Town



Weather, of course, influences shipping immensely, making scientific weather reporting and forecasting essential for the safety of tows such as those involving FPSOs and for many day-to-day shipping operations.

In Cape Town, it seems that westerly winter gales do not occur as regularly these days, and neither have we experienced as much early winter fog that used to keep the old Green Point foghorn going through many April nights, a haunting sound that I could hear from my childhood home in Mowbray, some eight kilometres away as the gull flies.

Not as deep-throated as that old blaster, the current foghorn – more akin to a vuvuzela, those dreadful, ear-splitting trumpets used by soccer fans - heralded a blanket of fog over the bay for most of Saturday. Yet late Sunday morning was so clear that one of the Essar Capesize bulkers was easily visible on the horizon as she headed for the iron ore terminal at Saldanha. Also clearly visible was the CHC helicopter carrying stores in the underslung cargo net for a large eastbound tanker, laden with West African oil.

However, when the cold fronts do pass through, the sea can become wild. Engendered by the recent storms that caused havoc along the southern coast, heavy seas have broken **Safmarine Agulhas**, aground next to the East London breakwater, and the vessel is a total loss. Most of the containers have been salvaged, and the wreck will be cut up, never an easy task. In this instance, her proximity to the breakwater will assist the acetylene torch brigade as pieces of steel can be hoisted across a relatively small gap.

Last week-end, the small bulker, **Shearwater**, tasted the full effects of the south westerly swell off the KwaZulu-Natal coast, taking a list and prompting the National Sea Rescue Institute crews and Air Force helicopters to scramble. Staying on board, her crew brought her into Durban amidst calm conditions.

Many a ship, southbound from Durban in the winter, has plunged into an abnormally deep trough, only to be hit by the equally abnormally high swell that follows, dumping thousands of tons of water on the foredeck and applying sudden, severe stresses on every frame and hull plate.

A seasoned master told me that he estimated the height of the wave that hit his Cape Town-bound coaster to be around 15 metres, and I understand that a 20-metre giant has been recorded off our coast.

I was a kid when **Edinburgh Castle** hit one of those "holes in the sea" between Durban and East London, sending the evening's dancers sprawling and causing damage to the forward end of the accommodation.

Other ships have suffered a worse fate. The mysterious disappearance of the passenger steamer **Waratah**, it is commonly believed, was attributable to her being overwhelmed by such a rogue wave. During the last Suez closure in May 1973, **Bencruachan**, a brand new British cargoliner, diverted from Durban to Cape Town as the former port had insufficient bunkers - sounds rather like the current situation in the bunker world - was hit by a swell with such force that her forward section cracked and lay at some angle to the fore-and-aft line, necessitating her to be towed stern-first to Durban.

Several large tankers have lost their bow in heavy weather off the coast, as did the containership **Neptune Sapphire** whose distress call sent the South African Navy's destroyer **Jan van Riebeeck** to the scene.

The ageing bulker **Alexandros T** that sank with tragic loss of life a few months ago also appears to have succumbed to heavy weather, if not a rogue wave. Disappearing with all hands earlier this year was **Jupiter 6**, the tug whose tow – a derelict bulker - was sighted well south of the coast and later recovered by **Smit Amandla**.

A British report – published in early August - is a little obsolete. "*Conditions favourable to rogue wave creation,*" it trumpets, "*have now been identified in the Agulhas current around South Africa.*" These fearful phenomena were identified and studied nearly forty years ago by UCT's Professor Mallory, a former naval captain, and current hi-tech satellite research relates to forecasting their occurrence.

Similar meteorological and oceanographic conditions, Mallory found, had occurred each time a ship reported a rogue wave. Generated by a south westerly gale, a heavy swell along the coast would run contrary to the Mozambique/Agulhas current, accentuating the height of the swell. When that current flows faster than its usual one or two knots - the late Captain Mike Chambers recorded a 10-knot flow on a voyage from Durban - the heavy swell might become irregular with abnormalities occurring.

Mallory also believed that another severe simultaneous depression in the Southern Ocean could cause swells from the direction of Prince Edward Island, aggravating the already troubled sea off the Wild Coast. Hence these huge swells. When snug abed these winter nights, spare a thought for those at sea - it can be a most inhospitable place.