

Episode 2

TYPHOON

WHAT CONSTITUTES SEAMANSHIP under adverse conditions and unexpected events is a matter of examining numerous variables, considering alternate possible solutions and coming up with a decision that results in a successful outcome for the ship and crew. Some manuals and books on naval procedures and rules may help as underpinnings of technical knowledge, but the specifics of the decision in unique situations are left to the captain to decide for himself, combining both technical knowledge and intuitive judgments.

While we were stationed at Ulithi Atoll, Captain Grant was confronted with a test of his seamanship when we were faced with an approaching typhoon. Fortunately he had unusually expert information on the path of the typhoon, strength and speed, and the surrounding differences in barometric pressure. We had a qualified graduate meteorologist aboard, and our PBMs had verified the exact location and initial direction of the developing storm. (The PBMs were sent off to Eniwetok well before the typhoon peaked.)

In addition to informing the Navy ships at sea of the course and strength of the typhoon, our Captain had the immediate problem of deciding the fate of his own ship.

The choice was between heading out to sea to escape the full force of the typhoon, or to remain in the lagoon and ride it out. Which choice depended on reliable knowledge of the path of the eye of the typhoon, whether it passed to the east or to the west of the atoll.

His decision was that the path of the typhoon indicated he should stay put and ride it out.

Timing was important, waiting to be sure the typhoon would not rapidly change direction. We were ready to weigh anchor fast and put to sea.

Once the decision was made to ride out the storm, there was a sudden flurry of action. The Captain ordered the anchor to be raised quickly and the second heavy anchor chained next to the first and then lowered. In the meantime all the anchor chain we had aboard, every last link, was welded into one long single chain with the two anchors at the end. This was a basic principle of seamanship: The longer the chain the safer the anchor.

Now we were ready for the big winds. And they came. At their peak the winds registered 190 mph on the meteorologist's gauge, as I remember. Well before the peak, the engine room was ordered to start the screws at one-quarter speed, and we increased screw speed as the winds increased to help take the load off the anchors.

We rode out the typhoon without moving a foot. Other ships

drifted by us dragging their anchors. I don't recall how many were beached or dragged out to sea.

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Captain Grant had been faced with a straightforward challenge to his seamanship under conditions of a typhoon, requiring good judgment and correct timing, and as usual his seamanship was superb.

But if you are responsible for land-based Navy aircraft, how can you protect them during a typhoon? This problem was faced by a young officer some months later, at a naval land air base in the Philippines, where a squadron of Navy land planes were stationed.

~~Naval regulations called for tying down planes when threatened by a storm. This young officer could visualize his aircraft yanked up, twisted and torn to bits, if they were tied down for a typhoon.~~

He reasoned that if he used the wind to his advantage he could save all the planes, merely by tying them down at the nose with a long tether, and setting the flaps for normal flight. The wind came roaring in; the planes were facing the wind and behaved as if they were in normal flight. Not a plane was damaged! I heard this story later, and met the officer, who got high marks on this one, for breaking regulations ("using his initiative")!

(To be continued.)

James K. Phillips
For Karl Wigdal
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