

Shipwrecked

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July 17, 2020

My tale of nautical tragedy occurred in May, 1961. I and 13 other students had been aboard a square rigger for 6 months and were approaching the end of our second semester aboard the Ocean Academy, an enterprise that was founded to provide a combination of high school teaching and sailing. The skipper and his wife both taught courses and there was additional faculty consisting of a math teacher and an English teacher. Our ship was the Brigantine Albatross, 92 feet in length. Square rigged foresail, Marconi mainsail.

We were 100 miles west of Key West, Florida when we spotted a line of squalls on the horizon. We had been through many such storms and took little notice. I and the rest of my watch completed our early morning shift and went below decks. The ship began heeling and we could tell that it was moving along at a faster clip than we had ever experienced before. It was heeling well past 60 degrees and finally flopped over to a full 90 degrees, with the masts lying in the water. I was lucky to be on the leeward side as it meant that I did not fall across the ship and could maintain my balance throughout. I made for the ladder amidships that led to the deck. It was normally vertical but now was horizontal, like a set of monkey bars in a playground. I worked my way to what was normally the top of the ladder and swam out. The fellow behind me said that once I got out there was a solid rectangle of water coming through the hatchway. He was a rather husky football player and managed to bull his way through the stream and survived. The fellow behind him saw that the normal exit was hopeless and slithered into a very narrow dumbwaiter shaft that led to the galley on deck. He too survived. The rest of the students in the midships cabin did not.

One unfortunate feature of square sails is that it is necessary to climb up the mast to furl them. The Albatross had steel masts, and the skipper was afraid of lightning so he did not want to send anyone aloft to do this. The result is that we were fully rigged when the storm hit. A cardinal rule of square riggers is that if you get into trouble, you do the opposite of what any modern sailor does, i.e. you head downwind. More precisely, you TRY to head downwind. Once the ship reached heeled past 45 degrees, two

things happened. First, the rudder became ineffective. Second, when the mainsheet was released, not much happened because the boom was already close to the water and thus could not go out any further, making it impossible to spill the wind from the sails. So there was no way to stop the ship from heeling all the way over.

This happened so fast that for a short time I thought I was the only one to get out. The ship sank in less than a minute. You can imagine my joy when I discovered that all those in the forward cabin had survived. Everyone in the rear cabin was lost. All told there were 13 survivors and 6 lost.

The most astonishing thing was that when I first emerged from below decks, the water was quite calm. There were raindrops making little circles on the surface. The skipper called this a white squall, meaning that there was no wind on the surface, and very high wind about 15 feet up. Thus, the ferocity of the wind was disguised until it was too late. The term "white squall" was forever imprinted in all of our minds. A movie with that name, starring Jeff Bridges, was made that purportedly describes the ragedy. You can see it on Amazon. As you might expect, this provides a somewhat Hollywoodized version of events.

The Albatross was equipped with a pair of wooden lifeboats. We bailed these out and bobbed about in the Gulf of Mexico for 24 hours. We are forever grateful to an alert helmsman aboard a Dutch freighter who spotted us.