

## Life-Saving Sailing Lessons from an Albatross

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An albatross quite possibly saved my life. It was 1972, and I was on a Hinckley 48' yawl sailing from Spain to South Africa. We were about 5 days west of Cape Town on the edge of the Roaring 40's. The wind had started picking up the previous afternoon and by evening the waves were over 30' high and around midnight a steering cable stretched and broke. I was woken up to help fix it. By the time we were able to fix it, it was 2 a.m. and time to go on watch.

By dawn the wind had increased to hurricane force gusts and we were surfing down waves 50' high. Those of you who know Hinckleys know the 48' is a full keel cruiser and it not designed for surfing. But with those waves and the strength of the wind we were. It was hard enough to steer the boat but we also had to try to keep track of the wind. The wind speed would go over 70mph in some of the gusts and then when we were deep in a trough between waves it might drop below 20 because of the way the wind was swirling around between the waves. Just after dawn, either I steered too much downwind or a wind shift caught us. In any case the boat jibed and when I was able to straighten out the boat, the wind caught the storm sail jib and snapped it back so hard that I was afraid the mast or rigging might break. It turned out that half of the hanks holding it to the forestay broke.

Scared of jibing again I started steering us on more of a broad reach. This seemed to be working until the crest of one of the bigger waves started to break and when that mass of water hit the side of the boat and knocked it over onto its side. The mast was horizontal and the deck vertical with water flooding over the righthand side of the ship. Fortunately, the hatches were closed, and we had on safety lines. If you think I was scared before at that point you were right, but now it started to feel like we actually were going to die.

I asked Carsten, my watch-mate, to take over the helm. I felt I was failing, and I was also totally exhausted from not having any sleep that night and fighting the storm.

Carsten refused, saying he couldn't do it.

That's when the albatross came to us. In the howling wind and huge waves, the albatross was calm and controlled as he glided toward us. He circled our boat and flew back the way he had come and was gone. Then he came back, with his wingtip seeming to skim the crest of the waves. The he circled the boat three times and I could feel the tension and panic slip away. The albatross was one with the storm. He wasn't fighting it, he seemed to be enjoying it and using it to help power him in his flight.

Time seemed to slow down. I let myself feel the boat and sail interacting with the waves and the wind. The boat seemed to be steering itself all I had to do was to work with it, not fight it. Everything was going to be alright.

Within a half an hour the wind slowly started to decrease, and our watch would finally be over. Turned out I had to stay at the helm an extra half hour because the Captain decided it was more important that he try to get a RDF or LORAN bearing from Capetown, even though it couldn't make any difference since we were still days away and well out of radio range.