

CRISIS MANAGEMENT ON THE HIGH SEAS

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Return trip from Tonga – a brief account of the circumstances that led to our rescue at sea and the scuttling of our yacht Carenza (the dates and times were extracted from the ship's log, from our blog site and from memory).

The long range plan was to head from Tonga to Minerva Reef (north or south depending on circumstances), then to use the Trade Winds to go to Position: 30°00'S 172°30'W, then use the prevailing westerly to south westerlies to head for the New Zealand coast. Our intention to make landfall at Auckland, as our primary target, or to bail and make for Opuia in bad weather.

Wed 24/06/09 12:15hrs NZST

Weighed anchor in Tonga.

Friday 26/06/09 19:00

Position: 24°23'S 179°45'W. Heading 230°T 5kts Wind 10-15 ENE Swell mild sea.

Blog Entry by Charles for Friday

We're nearly back in the Eastern Hemisphere. Made South Minerva at about 9.30 am winds were blowing a good 20 to 30kts with a lumpy sea. We dropped anchor and went for a swim and made the vessel shipshape. We changed the head sail from no 3 back to the number 2 and left by midday. It was great to show Josh this awesome spot albeit for only a short period. The weather however was not great and it was overcast but Josh enjoyed it. The wind has shifted to the north east and has slowed somewhat so the seas are not bad but we are presently under motor to try and keep our daily averages up. Mum took the opportunity to make dinner while in Minerva and we had a good breakfast of omelette sandwiches. We have been doing shifts of 3 on 6 off but no one seems to be sleeping 6 hours so we will try 2 on 4 off tonight and see how it goes. The temperature has certainly dropped and the crew are wearing thermals under their wet weather gear. Boy, are they in for a surprise in a few days time. Could just make out Black Adder on the radio – they are very nearly home. We also heard from Robin and Rick on Endangered Species they are happily in Musket Cove – wish we were too. It was also good to keep an all important sked with Sunstone this morning to discuss weather with Tom – we essentially will have a low approach as we arrive north of New Zealand and the winds will turn westerly then south westerly – hopefully we will reach the top of the North Island in time. It might also require us to make for Opuia instead of Auckland but we will know closer to the time.

Skipper

Saturday 27/6/09 19:00

Position: 26°05'S 178°15'E. Heading 230°T 5.5kts Wind 10-15 NE

Blog Entry by Charles and Joshua for Saturday

Winds 10 to 15kts north easterly, heading 230 true at a boat speed of 5 to 6 kts. We've had a reasonable day with a few showers – somehow this time the trip feels a lot slower and we are keen to be home. It's a long way. We are looking forward to a more northerly wind shift tomorrow and an increase in boat speed. This dead down wind



sailing under head sail although easy has an unpleasant motion, and the kids have spent most of the day sleeping with the lethargy that comes with a bit of sea sickness.

Skipper

Its true time goes quite slowly, it seems there are only 3 things to do on board, sleep, stare aimlessly at the empty horizon or cough up your guts overboard. Not quite, but the days just seem to plod by. Dads been great, picking up our slack when we sleep, and is reading Ella Enchanted to keep us entertained. However it is frustrating to know we will only be home in a week. I'd better find something to do or I might lose my mind. Missing home a lot.

Josh

Monday 29/6/09 07:00

Position: 28°25'S 174°56'E Heading 230°T 6kts Wind 20-25 WNW
Triple reefed main and storm jib.

Monday 29/6/09 19:00

Position: 29°19'S 174°04'E Heading 200°T 6kts Wind 30 gusting 40 Swell 4-6m, sea rough.

Tuesday 30/6/09 07:00

Position: 30°16'S 173°49'E Heading 180°T 4kts Wind 20-30 SW

Blog Entry by Joshua for Tuesday 30th June 2009

Position 30°57'S, 173°53'E. Boat speed 5-6kts, bearing 175° true.

Beating windward for 3 days in winds of 20-30 knots gusting 40plus, swells of 4 to 6 meters, have seen the odd ten meter one, waves continually breaking over and flooding the cockpit. Currently 360 nautical miles from Auckland, with the weather unlikely to change, we are all feeling sick, but surviving.

Josh

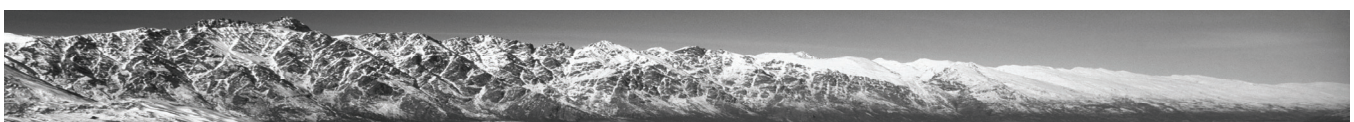
Sometime midmorning while Joshua(18) and Thomas (13) were on watch we came over a large wave and landed with such force that –

- All the drawers came open.
- Two new fractures through the main bulkhead (forward in the Saloon) were clearly evident. These fractures were on the port and starboard lower sides of the doorway to the forward compartment.
- A damage inspection revealed no obvious rigging damage, but a new hairline fracture in the forward area between the hull and keel stub was noted – there was no water leak and no other evidence of it opening during movement of the yacht to the waves.

Tuesday 30/6/09, shortly after 1700 hours

Approximate Position: 31°02'S 173°59'E

Over six hours later when Joshua and Thomas were back on watch (our watches on board were 3hrs on 6hrs off) we experienced another very severe fall off a wave and a large smash. I was alerted by the watch that the mast had collapsed. I immediately instructed all crew to put on life jackets and prepare to abandon ship should the situation deteriorate. We got out the bolt cutters and prepared to remove the rigging.



Assessment –

- We were, at this stage, still running with the triple reefed main, storm jib on the inner forestay and a small amount of unfurled working jib – enough to keep the boat speed up to 5 to 6 kts in order to allow us to maintain control of the vessel in the heavy seas. We had both travelling back stays secured.
- The boom had fallen over the port side of the cockpit missing Thomas by a few inches only.
- Most of the stanchions on the port side had been broken, as were the lifelines.
- The mast had broken in three pieces –
 1. Keel stepped mast broken just 18 inches above the deck.
 2. A six foot section still attached to the gooseneck of the boom.
 3. The remaining portion of the mast (some 13 meters of mast section) was vertical in the water from just above deck level.
- All rigging appeared intact.
- The halyards inside the mast section were all intact.
- The mast section had fallen to the port of the vessel – we were on a starboard tack and the vessel had now been blown over the rigging which was now under the keel.
- The rigging was however stable and we were effectively hove to drifting at a rate of 0.5 kts to leeward.
- None of the crew were injured.
- A new crack in the main forward bulkhead had developed in the starboard upper section of the door way.
- The hairline crack in the keel stub / hull joint now extended a good 12 inches to port and starboard – however there was no water leak or visible movement.
- The seating structure in the saloon against the forward bulkhead had now shifted nearly an inch aft.
- We had lost use of our HF radio (back stay antennae in the water).
- We had lost the use of the VHF (mast antennae in the water).

Viable options –

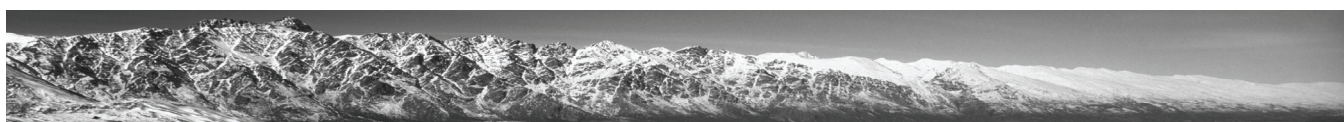
- Remove the rigging and attempt to free the vessel, and attempt to continue under motor. – we would still need to possibly obtain more diesel to complete the trip, as the 200 to 300 nautical miles we would need to travel, was on our limits of remaining diesel. We would however be still in a vessel that was not structurally sound with potential issues with the integrity of the hull. We would still have to travel to windward in a rough sea and continue damaging the already damaged vessel – see above. The mast was presently stable and any attempt to move it might result in us putting a hole through the side of the yacht.
- We could at this stage activate a May Day and remain safely with the vessel until rescue. We have a crew that is in reality fatigued, and still children after all. We have no confidence in our vessel anymore due to structural damage. This call would however mean that we would have to abandon the vessel in international waters. The weather was calming but further gales forecast.

After the above assessment I elected to choose the option of rescue and to abandon the vessel for the sake of my children. I believe, had I taken the option to save the vessel and one of my children had come to serious harm or even death, that I would have been found culpable in any New Zealand court for putting the vessel above the welfare of the crew. With sad heart I then instructed my son Matthew to activate the EPIRB (emergency position indicating radio beacon) and we initiated the sequence of events that resulted in our eventual rescue and the scuttling of our vessel.

Mayday and Rescue

Sometime between 1700 and 1730 we activated our 406 EPIRB (with GPS) – the lanyard was tied to the pushpit and left floating in the water.

We then used our satellite phone to call the rescue coordination centre (incidentally this was not as straight forward as expected as the number in our book was no longer active and other numbers were office hours only) – we only had 7 minutes left on the phone. – the phone call established that the EPIRB had been picked up. We gave a brief description of our circumstances and we were asked to establish HF communications. This was achieved by disconnecting the antennae lead from the backstay, and attaching a 10m wire, from our spares box, to the end of a fishing rod secured to the pulpit with cable ties. We initially called on 4meg and then 6meg. We established a very poor contact with Taupo Maritime Radio but were soon helped by a Hobart Shore station who did the mayday relay. We were informed that an Airforce Hercules C130 was on its way – to arrive 21:30hrs – Also that a French naval warship (La Glorieuse) was 50 nm off and was steaming towards us. We remained on



the 6meg frequency and kept in touch with the mayday relay through the Hobart station. At 21:30hrs we made VHF contact with search aircraft (Kiwi Rescue). They requested a flare to be set off. A moment of light relief as Matthew heroically set off a flare and wondered why there was nothing but blackness – it was a smoke flare. He rapidly redeemed himself and set off a handheld orange flare – visual contact was made and we put on our riding lights. The aircraft then continued a lone vigil circling our yacht and making occasional radio contact to let us know the progress of the French naval vessel. This vigil was so comforting to the crew that they just sat in the cockpit watching.

A few hours later we made VHF contact with the French vessel – we had already established SSB contact – once they had a visual on us, the aircraft returned to New Zealand. I had a discussion with Captain Numa Durbec about the rescue. The upshot of which was that although stricken, our vessel was not in immediate danger, and that a night time rescue would endanger the life of my crew and his crew. He would remain circling at a 2 mile distance off our vessel and maintain vigil and we would go below and batten down the hatches in case we rolled during the night. We spent a sleepless night with the odd wave breaking over us listening to rigging groan and the mast hitting against the keel. We remained in our wet weather gear and with life jackets on ready to take action if needed. All this time we kept in VHF contact with the warship.

Wed 30/6/09

Position: 31°02'S 173°59'E

At day break, when there was sufficient light, we made contact again with Captain Durbec and discussed the rescue. The sea had calmed considerably and there was now just a 2m swell. A large Zodiac (rigid inflatable boat, RIB) was lowered from the warship and four men with black helmets, two of whom had wetsuits on, made their way to Carenza. The two in wetsuits boarded our yacht and assisted me in getting Joy and our three youngest children into the Zodiac. They remained on board while the others made their way back to the warship where they climbed up a rescue net hanging over the side of the ship to waiting hands that pulled them over the gunnels. The RIB returned and collected the three older children. I then collected some personal belongings and bags with clothes that we had hastily packed, and loaded them into the RIB. As the RIB returned to the warship with our belongings I went below with the two French crew to examine the damage and discuss our options. I requested that they assist me in freeing the rigging and tow the vessel. They had another discussion with Captain Durbec. In short, in discussion with them and myself, it was decided that the vessel would not survive a tow and would break up before reaching Auckland, and would unnecessarily put crew at risk. So we were going to abandon the vessel. More discussion – the upshot was that a Marine Safety Authority request, that the vessel be scuttled if it were to be abandoned, was made known to me. It was then pointed out that I was the master and skipper and it was my responsibility to do so. They produced a waterproof video camera and had me quickly rehearse the events and had me acknowledge my responsibility to scuttle the vessel. They then videoed me opening the stopcocks and flooding the yacht. They then used an axe and helped me to break open some of the other piping. All equipment that could float was removed from the outside of the yacht and locked in the saloon. The main hatch was closed and locked and then they broke the windows to let the air out. They then returned to the RIB leaving me on board for a few moments to say goodbye. This was a heart wrenching moment for me and the first time that I felt the emotions well up inside – my family were all now safely on the warship. I stood at the wheel one last time and then removed our flag and boarded the RIB. The exact location of the sinking of Carenza is 31°02', 4'S 173°59,6'E.

Once reunited with my family in the Officers' Mess on La Glorieuse, I then went to the bridge to witness the sinking of Carenza – which actually took a surprising amount of time and made me realise just how bad things must be before your yacht actually sinks.

Once underway back to Auckland, we were given fresh towels, shampoo, soap and fresh naval overalls that the crew were wearing and given access to the officers' and captain's showers.

The time on the French naval warship was a fantastic experience and we were treated really well. Some of the ratings were moved and we were given two cabins one with six berths and one with two for our exclusive use. We ate with the officers and were given free run of the vessel. I even did one of the four hour early morning watches on the bridge as we approached Auckland.

We arrived back in Auckland amid intense media interest – we were not to know of an incident a few days prior which resulted in the French President making a personal public apology to our Prime Minister. We had friends



and family on the quay to greet us, plus a huge contingent of press, TV stations, and radio stations. This resulted in interviews from the time of our arrival till night fall, including live breakfast TV the next morning. All good however for Franco-Kiwi relations.

We will forever remain profoundly grateful for the efforts of the French Navy, our own Airforce and Rescue Coordination Centre and countless friends, family and strangers who said prayers on our behalf. By the grace of God we are back in New Zealand, having had a profoundly wonderful adventure for two months, and all safe and sound. We will miss our wonderful yacht that has been our home for this time and protected us from the elements till the very last.

