

# **The Corkscrew**

## **Encounter with a Rogue Wave**

by

### **Dave Chambers**

Our job was done. The 'Malaysian Confrontation' as it became known was over. We could go home. Our delight at the end of the confrontation and the prospect of going home was tempered by the impending demise of the 'team' - The Far East Mine Counter-Measure Squadron. Twenty boats of the "ton" class coastal minesweepers, each four hundred tons of wood and engines. One British boat 'HMS INVERMORISTON' and one New Zealand boat 'HMNZS SANTON' were to sail from Singapore to Portsmouth to be put into reserve - the moth-ball fleet. There was a ceremony - a small parade - a band - then the 'Mighty Mo' and 'Santa', as they were to us, put to sea.

An urgent signal meant we had to alter our course. Instead of turning left at the top of the Malacca Straits and heading almost due West to Ceylon, we should reroute to Gan, where a RAF base would fuel and provision us for the journey to Aden. But we could not make the extra journey so we had a new rendezvous. Early next morning in the lee of the Nicobar Islands we met the supply vessel and replaced the fuel and water we had used in the last 24 hours.

Leaving the relative shelter off Nicobar we met the full force of the weather; '*severe gale force nine, gusting to ten*' the radio said and I wished I hadn't listened. The wind was coming from the East and we turned to head southwest, which seemed like a definite mistake. With a wind of that force the waves travel quickly, faster than our eleven knot economical speed, and it meant the sea was coming at us from behind the port side. The effect is commonly known as The Corkscrew. The ship begins to roll over to starboard and the back end begins to lift, it keeps lifting and rolling over to starboard until the crest of the wave reaches half way along the ship, at that point the whole balance changes and there is a violent shift from the high stern and starboard bias to a high bow with a port bias after which we slide down the back side of the wave into the advancing trough. It may be that this only seems worse than other forms of roll because you can never get out of the way of the next wave even though it appears to overtake very lazily.

The first few hours of the corkscrew were also the time when we lost sight of land and then, as our course dictated, left the main east west shipping lanes, the large merchantmen becoming a distant smoke trail then completely disappearing. Out in the wilderness the waves got bigger, and we stopped sliding down the back of them, instead, at the height they were now, we just fell off.

The afternoon was a lighter grey, the storm did not lessen but it began to look like there still was a sun somewhere above the clouds. It did not impress me, this lighter grey, I wished to God I was somewhere else, anywhere else. The precarious time on top of the wave, when we could look and *maybe* see Santa half a mile off the starboard side was the time when force ten blown spray hit us, hard. Taking fresh air was not an easy pastime. I held on and watched the waves, there was nothing else to look at.

That's when I heard the warning shout, then I saw the roller. Much higher than usual, the spray did not leave this wave to be hurled at whatever unfortunate was in the way, it stuck to the wave

and hung over in front of it, like a seaside roller with the roll moving along the wave towards us, the difference was its size, I was looking up at this one, it was higher than the funnel, higher than the radar scanner, way up, leaning over us, about to roll right over us, maybe even roll us over.

A real rogue wave.

I looked at the bulkhead door, it was shut, that meant I didn't have to rush to close it but I had no time to open it and get through. My knuckles whitened on the safety lines. We rolled slightly to starboard and the back end began to rise I looked round for Santa, I saw only water. The curling spray smashed into us, pushing us over so I was standing almost horizontally, it tore at my grip, pulling me downwards. The ship tried to right itself, it's buoyancy pushing it up while the water rushed downwards trying to pull me with it. My grip tightened and seconds later Mighty Mo was triumphantly riding the crest. Santa was still there and the urgent calls to each other on deck were all answered.

Mo was now to be punished for her audacity. The props left the water, with no load the engine overspeed alarm bells started ringing and the wave held on to us so the bells kept ringing. Reducing engine speed means that when we drop into the trough we may not have enough time to regain the necessary push to run before the next wave so we really will just be drift-wood and maybe not so lucky next time. It cannot have been long but it seemed to be before I felt my feet leave the deck and we went into the by now familiar free fall. My grip stayed as tight as was possible so I followed a few inches behind Mo into the chasm. It took longer than usual to get down but down we came, dropping like a stick from a bridge and hitting the back of the wave with a knee buckling sledgehammer blow that all but stopped the slowing engines. More alarm bells started. Something was missing, the sound of the generator and the engine room air intake fans were silent. I opened the genny-room door, hastily closed it behind me and descended quickly in the dark, a small battery light over the busbar the only relief, but it didn't matter, number two genny had failed, I didn't need to see anything, within seconds, number one was running at work speed, and almost immediately toned down deeper, maintaining speed while taking the load. Sparks, who had come through the lobby hatch turned the busbar switches from two to one. I made for the bilge pump The genny-room fans wound up, and I felt, and heard over all the noise, the low growl from beyond the bulkhead as the engine room fans allowed the main engines to take that deep breath, and the slight shudder as the propellers bit into the water, pushed us forward, we were under way.

Half a second later I gripped hard on the bilge pump as we tilted over to starboard and the back end began to lift. When we came down I repaired to the upper deck. Santa was OK too. Quietly I asked the deity to disregard my request to be anywhere else, there were worse places than being on Mo's deck, like, not being on Mo's deck.

Abject fear works wonders as a cure for seasickness but its effects were wearing off by the time it got dark, then someone said that if another freak wave came over we wouldn't see it till it hit us. Thanks, the fear returned. I wasn't sure which was preferable.

Morning did happen. The lighter grey started earlier but it made me more fearful of the sea because visibility was better and from the top of the waves we could see farther but there was nothing else, only sea and Santa. There were the occasional flying fish. Sometimes there was a shoal of them all flying together but this was probably an escape from some predator, life goes on, even out here.