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Boat Smart

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'Perfect Storm' or not

By Chief Tom Rau, Coast Guard Group Grand Haven

This special column is in behalf of the Coast Guard's 210th birthday on August 4, 2000. In particular, it salutes those "Storm Warriors", especially the young ones, who dauntlessly carry out Coast Guard search and rescue missions despite the time, the weather, the danger.

I've seen generations come and go in the Coast Guard. Are they different? Yes, in many ways, but one thing remains steadfast: their will to run before the storm- perfect or not. And I'm not just talking about salty old stereotypes; I'm talking about youngsters. Yet, make no mistake about it, when it comes to their role as "Storm Warriors" they far exceed their years. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the book the Perfect Storm. The deck force of 23 aboard the 205-foot, single screw cutter Tamaroa found many mirroring their high school yearbook photo. When I read the book, I was in awe- how did they snatched four Air National Guard airmen from 90-foot seas after the airmen's Jayhawk helicopter ditched off the Massachusetts's coast, 70 miles south of Long Island, NY?

I really wanted to talk with someone who was aboard that night. Good fortune came my way. Group Grand Haven Telecommunications Specialist, Mitchell Muehlhausen was on the Tamaroa's bridge that night alongside Commander Brudnicki, the cutter's captain. Here is his account of how they braved the then "no-name-storm", especially the young deck force who had to battle monstrous seas that found 20-foot high walls of green-water plunging across the Tamaroa's open decks.

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October 30, 1991, 02:30 North Atlantic, 39-51 North, 72-00 West. Muehlhausen recalls standing alongside the captain when he spotted a strobe light pierce the darkness. Muehlhausen said he couldn't believe darkness could be so dark. After spotting the strobe, which they suspected was coming from a downed Jayhawk air crewman, they directed an Air Force C-130 to drop a parachute flare over the strobe light. Meanwhile, the Tamaroa's gunners mate blasted off parachute flares from the second deck. Hurricane force winds drove the flare side ways into the seas.

Muehlhausen watched the C-130's flare flicker as it worked through a thick layer of boiling clouds 200 feet overhead; the flare's incandescent blaze soon revealed the storm's true severity. Huge columns of green water thundered over the decks.

Muehlhausen said wind gusting reached 120 knots; one gust ripped a HF radio antenna from its base. That was just one of many items, including the ship's small boat, that became a storm casualty.

The captain directed the helmsman to come up wind of the strobe light. The cutter rolled from starboard to port at 55-degrees, dangerously nearing her 72-degree righting arm (roll over angle) as the vintage world-war-two cutter lay broadside to the seas. Knees strained and ankles twisted as hands grabbed grip bars through violent rolls. Any loose object had long since departed and Muehlhausen found writing impossible; he passes radio traffic between rescue units, including aircraft, by memory.

On deck seamen timed the rolls and hustled to throw a net over the side. Those who misjudged the roll were spewed across the open deck, or flushed down the huge air vents like cockroaches swirling down a drain. Some 35 feet above the main deck, Muehlhausen and others on the bridge took quick head counts, their sighs suggested the entire deck force had regrouped. Above the tempest, a collective roar from all 83 crewmen encouraged the airmen to swim to the netting. The edge of the deck plunged into the sea and then rocketed 20 feet upward, ripping the net from airmen hands. On the

dip the seamen sprang from behind cover and again scrambled to the rail. The sea swirled around knees, wind mashed hair against skulls, eyes burned with salt water, hurricane winds pierced eardrums - the crew ignored it all as their adrenalin overrode the storm. The 'deckies' grasped the net and heaved upward 600 pounds of dead weight. The ship again pitched, setting free its human cargo. The deck force again regrouped and again sighs filled the bridge. On the next roll they nabbed an airman, and then several rolls later the others. Muehlhausen said the cheering and yelling from the crew silenced the storm. He further added that the copilot couldn't muster up enough energy to move a finger

Commander Brudnicki later explained why he put his crew at such great risk "I was just not going to watch those people in the water die." Nor was his deck force. Undoubtedly, the Commander would be the first to say that they were the unsung heroes of the 'Perfect Storm'. They certainly are mine. Brudnicki also said: "I certainly hope that was the high point of my career." It could well be, Commander, but for the young deck force it could be just the beginning of their Storm Warrior careers. I hope so, for they embrace the true spirit of the Coast Guard.

And when you consider the great risks coasties or other rescue agencies take to assist mariners you can understand why hoax calls are so hideous. Earlier this year a Grand Haven boat crew aboard a 47-foot motor lifeboat spent over six hours pursuing a hoax call in miserable conditions. Seaman Holubec told me ice formed on her eyebrows while standing lookout. Hours later, the crew returned to the station exhausted.

As of August 6, 2000 Group Grand Haven has received 33 hoax calls, involving 281.3 resource hours at a cost of \$35,810. If you have information regarding the pranksters, please, call the Coast Guard toll-free tipline at (800) 264-5980. Boat Smart- make that call.

Boat Smart is now on the Internet:
www.boatsmart.net (includes Lake Michigan water
temperatures and local weather).

Use channel 16 for emergencies, and channel 9 for
calling fellow boaters.

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Rau in the interest of promoting safe boating.