

# A Storm with No Name

Story by Rick Booth (former First Word editor)

Appeared in First Word - November 1991

**H**urricanes get names and hype, but for old-fashioned natural violence it's hard to beat a classic First District northeaster-like the one that raked New England on Halloween week, mauling Coast Guard assets and writing new chapters in the history of search and rescue.



Photo courtesy of CGC *Tamaroa*

Lashed by 75-knot winds and battling 35- and 40-foot seas, *Tamaroa's* smallboat maneuvers close to the S/V *Satori*. The boats were lost, but a First District air crew recovered everyone, civilian and Coast Guard alike.

Tracking west-southwest, the storm brought winds in excess of 80 knots, roiling seas to well over 40 feet. Pounding surf and high tides left havoc behind, notably among Southern New England lighthouses and other aids-to-navigation. "Damage," said a Coast Guard message to Atlantic Area headquarters on Governors Island, "far exceeded that of Hurricane Bob in August."

Search-and-rescue files bulged, from relatively small coastal cases, run by 44-foot motor lifeboats, to the one that captured regional and even national attention. So intense was the district response that Secretary of Transportation Samuel B. Skinner made a special trip to congratulate First District crews. Skinner stopped first at Air Station Cape Cod, where flight crews were recovering from more than 72 hours of the most intense activity in memory; and then at the Cutter *Tamaroa* (WUEC- 166), whose work in the storm captivated the region. At both locations, Skinner circulated freely -- and with great relish -- among the ranks, passing out his special "Way to Go" pins, and doing his best to overlook no one wearing a Coast Guard uniform.

Throughout a day celebrating lifesaving, an underlying note of sadness played as Coast Guardsmen remembered a fellow lifesaver still missing. An Air National Guard helicopter crewman, deployed from Suffolk County, Long Island with his aircraft to assist Coast Guard search and rescue assets, became separated from four others on his flight when their helicopter was forced to ditch in heavy seas. *Tamaroa* rescued the four, and searched vainly for the fifth. Cutter *Spencer* (WMEC-905) spent nearly a week searching as well, having responded to a midnight call to stem from Boston as the height of wind and waves.

When the storm began, *Tamaroa* was in the protection of Provincetown, anchored in the lee of the tip of Cape Cod. Word arrived that the sailing vessel *Satori* and its three people on board needed help about 75 miles south of Nantucket Island. *Tamaroa* weighed anchor and set the special sea detail. The ship slipped into the Cape Cod Canal about 2 am. on Tuesday, Oct. 29. The canal cuts through the "shoulder" of the Cape, shunting many miles from the route ships would otherwise take between Vineyard Sound and Massachusetts Bay.

The canal cut *Tamaroa's* steaming time, but it was not without cost. "We were forced to set the special sea detail going through," said CDR Lawrence G. Brudnicki, *Tamaroa's* commanding officer, 44 so those guys didn't get as much sleep as they otherwise might for when they needed it."

Through the canal and into deeper water, Brudnicki ordered as much speed as *Tamaroa's* diesel-electric propulsion plant could send to its single shaft. Built in 1943 as a Navy fleet tug, *Tamaroa* can tow an aircraft

carrier," as the hands often tell visitors, but it was never a sprinter. This time it nearly met its match in steadily building waves. "We were making turns for eight and nine knots," Brudnicki said, "and only doing about two-and-a-half over the bottom."

Slowly but surely, as though on hands and knees, *Tamaroa* crawled offshore to the *Satori*, then being monitored by aircraft from Cape Cod. "Seas weren't too bad at that point," said Chief Boatswain's Mate T. David Amidon. "They were only about 15 to 20 feet."

Radio consultation among *Tamaroa*, *Satori*, and the District Operations Center in Boston determined that *Tamaroa* would launch a small boat, to transfer cold weather survival clothing to *Satori*. As *Tamaroa's* most experienced coxswain, Amidon would make the trip in the ship's 21-foot rigid-hull inflatable Hurricane. *Tamaroa* has long been a fixture on Georges Bank and other parts of the busy Northeast fishing grounds, and so launched its small boats literally thousands of times. But as Amidon and every single one of his shipmates knew, all bets are off when the weather wills it. Amidon picked for the ride two seasoned hands, MK I Herb Summers and BM3 Jeffrey R. "Reggie" Ruggeiro.

The trip did not begin auspiciously. Small boat launching at sea is fraught with hazard enough. In the storm things were far trickier. "We tore a lifting eye practically out of the fiberglass before we even left the ship," Amidon said.

On its own, the little Hurricane scurried between the creaming peaks of the gray waves, delivering survival suits to *Satori*. But in so doing, a wave, "just lifted us up, and brought our bow of the boat down on the sailboat," Amidon said. "The impact ruptured one of our pontoons." From that point, Amidon needed all his skill and experience just to keep the Hurricane oriented to wind and weather in a way that kept it from being swamped. Picking up the *Satori* crew was now out of the question. Even getting back aboard *Tamaroa* was a question, one Amidon weighed in his mind for two long hours as his crippled boat played shepherd to the pitching sloop. "Then the weather really started to pick up," Amidon said, increasing to 25-to-35 foot breaking seas. It became obvious that the *Satori* people would have to come off -- and that the Coast Guard small boat couldn't do it, not in those seas with a half-deflated hull. The Hurricane crew watched as a man and two women slipped from the sloop into the water, fortunately about 70 degrees thanks to a helpful Gulf Stream. From there, a Coast Guard rescue swimmer deployed from a Cape Cod HH-3F, guiding them in turn into the helicopter's hoisting basket. Eyeing their flawless ascent, Tom Amidon was still assessing the chances of getting himself and two others safely back on *Tamaroa* -- with or without the RHI. With seas building by the minute, and the Hurricane sluggish as periodic waves defied the coxswain's touch and filled it, the chances of at least a few broken bones were excellent.

"What do you want to do, Boats?" asked an unseen *Tamaroa* voice from the Hurricane's portable radio speaker. The chief looked at his two charges.

"I want to go into the water," he said matter-of-factly, "and have the helo pick us up."

On the ship, Brudnicki conferred with his senior people. Executive Officer LCDR Melville B. Guttormsen, Operations Officer LT Kristopher G. Furtney, and QMC Steven J. Harblin all knew the odds. Furtney delivered the verdict to the Hurricane: "Go ahead, Chief."

"It turned out to be the easiest part of all," Amidon said. "We just slipped into the water, and the wind took the boat right away from us. The helo lowered the basket, and we got in. About an hour and a half later, we were on Cape Cod." A score of media was waiting there, to hear the story of a thrilling offshore rescue. Amidon smiled ruefully at the memory. "We didn't even go through the hard part, like the rest of the ship's crew did."

With the weather now truly foul even by Coast Guard standards, another emergency flared. High in the sky and miles away, the Air National Guard HH-60 Pavehawk crew came to the realization that mid-air refueling from an Air Guard KC-130 tanker would be impossible and the helo was out beyond range of shore. "We're going to land in the water in about 30 minutes," its pilot told First District Operations. "Where do you want us to head?"

District controllers pored over the charts, calculating quickly. *Tamaroa* was closest. Soon aircraft and cutter were communicating directly by VHF radio. "The last thing we heard from him was that he had 40 pounds of fuel left," said Brudnicki, or about enough for the landing and that was it.

The captain's announcement that the ship was "diverted for SAR" electrified the crew, many said later. "We heard it was an Air National Guard helo," said MKC Christian R. LaPense, "and about 15 seconds later there wasn't a Mustang suit hanging up anywhere. They were all on somebody." The Air Guard air crew, everyone on *Tamaroa* knew, was an air rescue asset itself – the ship was rescuing its own kind.

At least they had a pretty good position fix. *Tamaroa* again put everything it had to the main shaft. The Pavehawk had gone in less than 15 miles away, but conditions like these translated 15 miles into almost five hours. For all that time *Tamaroa* surged through swells at least as high as anything anyone onboard had ever seen -- including XO Guttormsen, the Coast Guard's officer Ancient Mariner.

"If I even fly in an airplane at night," observed Brudnicki, "I'm going to wear five or six strobe lights. Because we wouldn't have found them if they hadn't been wearing strobes."

Lookouts spied the bobbing pinpricks of light, raising the ship-wide alarm. Furtney had the con. "She likes to ride beam-to," Furtney said of *Tamaroa*, "so I tried to put us beam-to and up-swell, to drift down to where they were." Meanwhile, ENS William F. Moeller, the first lieutenant, was supervising the deck force as they hung scrambling nets on both sides of *Tamaroa's* bow. Moeller and BM1 Mark P. Gibbons both feared losing a man over the side. "We used the partner system," Moeller said. "We paired off. Every time a big wave broke, you called out your partner's name to make sure we hadn't lost anybody." Wave after wave smashed green across the forecabin, but every partner answered, every time.

"In one way, the darkness helped us on deck," Moeller said. "We couldn't see how big the waves were. Guys were hiding behind bits and things like that, crawling out when they had to. But once we saw those strobe lights, it didn't seem like we worried about the waves."

The first airman *Tamaroa* got aboard was apparently the least worn from his ordeal, rescuers said. When first sighted, all four were together in the water, arms linked. As *Tamaroa* drifted down on them, one man broke from the others and swam for the scrambling net. Just as he reached the ship's side, *Tamaroa* lifted on an especially large crest, "and he drifted under the stem," Moeller said. "We had to scramble from the port side to the starboard." Nevertheless, a dozen *Tamaroa* hands heaved the instant his hands found the mesh. "We were really pumping some adrenaline," Moeller said, "so that net came aboard fairly fast." Once the man was aboard, so death-defying was his grip on the net that his fingers had to be coaxed free.

While all hands maintained the usual "man overboard" watch on those bobbing strobes, Furtney maneuvered the ship to get the remaining three men. "Chief LaPense must have been worried about the engine numbers I was ringing up," Furtney joked afterward. For his part, LaPense just shrugged. "We were on a SAR case. What was I going to do, ask him not to do what he had to?" After frustrating moments, all three remaining airmen had their hands on the starboard netting -- when the bow disappeared under a sea. As the Atlantic cascaded away, "two of them were gone," Moeller said. "They'd been swept down the starboard side and under the stern."

On the fantail, SN Pope and SN Martin T. Haddock Jr. looked over, horrified to see one of the men hanging onto *Tamaroa's* huge rudder. "Get out of there," they yelled, but the man obviously could not help himself. It was a tense moment. Fortunately, the same seas that put him there removed the man seconds later. "They both just drifted around to the port side, and we got them over the rail," Moeller said.

"They were pretty cold, of course" said HS2 Timothy M. Merrell, who examined all four men as soon as they were aboard. "Other than that they had some broken fingers, and what I suspected were a broken arm bone and some broken ribs." Passing his suspicions ashore to a flight surgeon by radio, Merrell was told to make one of his patients ready for helicopter evacuation. When the weather moderated, an HH-65 from Air Station Brooklyn evacuated the patient without incident.

The rescue left a deep impression on the men of the *Tamaroa*, one Eric Pope seemed to say for them all. Standing there on *Tamaroa's* deck, he examined a memento from the patrol handed to him by his agency's highest official, Sam Skinner. Encased in a plastic box, it was a lapel pin, the Department of Transportation logo with the words "Way to Go" attached.

"You know," Pope said softly, "we do a lot of jobs out here. We do everything they ask us to. But this is search and rescue -- and that's what it's all about."



First Ward photo/Rick Bosch

Word of the District's storm response spread far and wide—all the way to Washington, D.C., where Secretary of Transportation Samuel B. Skinner rearranged his schedule to visit both *Tamaroa* and Air Station Cape Cod. Displaying "Way to Go" pins presented to them, and all their shipmates, are *Tamaroa* hands (left to right) HS2 Tim Merrell, SN Eric Pope, DC1 Alberto Alicea, and SN Mark Madden. Above right is an expanded drawing of the pin.

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