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AFR Midnight Rambler— Hell on White Water

After the knockdown that tore the anemometer off the top of the mast, the Ramblers had to do some quick and serious thinking about their options. The *Sword of Orion* hadn't broadcast its warning yet, but everyone knew that conditions were dangerous and getting worse.

As Ed, Bob, and Arthur engaged in a tense discussion about whether to pull out of the race, they saw another boat heading in the opposite direction. The boat was bigger than *AFR Midnight Rambler*. In the distance it appeared to be a BH 41—a 41-foot cruiser-racer, and it was not doing well.

Steering a boat in big waves is no easy task, especially with the wind coming from behind. As the boat slides down the waves, the rudder is less responsive and the helmsman has much less control. The BH 41 seemed to be sailing erratically, and Bob was carefully following her movements. Ed shouted over, "She's carrying on a real treat, yawing and rolling all over the place!" Bob nodded in agreement.

Ed, Arthur, and Bob met again to consider their options. The port of Eden was 40 miles behind them, but that meant turning in the face of the storm and running with their back to the wind. The BH 41 had shown them what that would bring. The first safe port in Tasmania was

200 miles into the teeth of the storm. The temptation to turn around and run for shelter—only 40 miles away—was huge. They all wanted to do it, but they knew the risks.

The crew had been through big waves in '94, so they realized how seas like this could affect a boat as small as their 35-footer. Turning around would be dicey. The change in direction would increase their chances of taking a wave beam on, from the side. With the size of these waves, there was a fair chance they could be rolled 360 degrees.

The Ramblers had no way of knowing what had happened with *Stand Aside* and *Siena*. But they knew that a roll would likely mean they'd be dismasted. If that happened, there was a very good chance that someone would die.

Neither pressing ahead nor turning back felt safe. But Ed was convinced that the crew was capable and they were tough. Though Chris was in pain, he was talking clearly and coherently, and making repeated requests to come up on deck and help. Taking all that into account, Ed and the crew agreed on what they needed to do.

There was no vote, no show of hands, and no formal meeting. But after Ed had spoken with everyone, the Ramblers were in complete agreement: *AFR Midnight Rambler* would sail into the storm and make the almost 500-mile journey to Hobart. They double-checked their harnesses, emergency signaling equipment, and life rafts. Whatever happened, they would be ready. It was not easy going. Official records of the Bureau of Meteorology later showed that the maximum *average* winds in the Bass Strait reached 60 knots, with frequent gusts close of 75. These sustained winds generated massive waves more than 80 feet high.

One way of understanding what the Ramblers would encounter is to use the *Beaufort Scale* as a yardstick. The Beaufort Scale—initially designed to provide a common language to describe the effect of wind and waves on the sails of a warship—is still used as a way of understanding severe weather conditions.

Based on the official Bureau of Meteorology estimates, *AFR Midnight Rambler* was sailing into weather conditions that, on the Beaufort Scale, would be classified as a *Force 11 Violent Storm*. There were reliable reports, however, that conditions were, in fact, considerably worse than those described by the Bureau of Meteorology. According to these reports, boats in the Bass Strait would encounter a *Force 12 Hurricane.*

In a Beaufort *Force 12 Hurricane,* winds are greater than 64 knots, the air is filled with foam, waves are over 45 feet, the sea is completely white

with driving spray, and visibility is greatly reduced. For a small boat, a *Force 12 Hurricane* is hell on white water.

One of the weather accounts came from Darryl Jones, pilot of the police helicopter *Polair 1* initially dispatched to the *Stand Aside* rescue operation.[1] Shortly after departing, he was diverted by Australian Search and Rescue (AusSAR) to assist with the search for another boat, *Business Post Naiad*. Then his orders changed once more, and he was redirected to rescue a crew member who had been washed overboard from the yacht *Kingurra*.

On his way to the first search location, Jones encountered winds over 85 knots. These were the strongest winds he had ever experienced in twelve years with the Police Air Wing. The helicopter normally cruised at 120 knots, but the strong tailwinds increased his airspeed to 205 knots.[2]

When Jones began the search for the missing *Kingurra* sailor, the sea was—as he described it—in a "wild and horrendous state." There were rain showers and continuous sea spray with a cloud base extending from 600 to 2,000 feet. The wind was blowing about 75 knots, and the waves were 80 to 90 feet high.

The police crew finally located the missing man, John Campbell, who was drifting some 300 yards from the boat. Constable David Key was winched into the water, and Jones held a 100-foot hover above him. When Jones looked up and saw a wall of water coming toward the chopper, he realized he would need to gain altitude quickly to avoid being swamped. Jones climbed 50 feet, and the wave missed the helicopter by about 10 feet as measured by the radio altimeter. It had to be well over 100 feet high.

No two storms are ever exactly alike, but these conditions were much like the extreme weather encountered by sailors off the coast of Nova Scotia in 1991. In that Halloween nor'easter—described in Sebastian Junger's book, *The Perfect Storm*—waves over 100 feet and sustained winds of 60 knots were recorded. This "meteorological hell" led to the deaths of the six fishermen on the *Andrea Gail,* six other fatalities, and millions of dollars in damage. In many ways, the '91 Nova Scotia storm and the '98 Australian weather bomb were proving to be eerily similar.

Both storms were destructive, and both created extraordinarily high waves. But the waves of the Bass Strait were uniquely dangerous. Sailors call the Bass Strait *the washing machine,* and with good reason. Waves in the Strait are confused, and they can churn in from any direction. The turmoil created by these waves makes them even more daunting than waves in the open ocean.

Not only were the *Rambler* and her crew in a confused sea of extremely high waves, they were also fighting something else. Bass Strait waves are high—and they are "sharp," too. Because the Strait is so shallow, waves form like surf hitting the beach on a shoreline. In this weather bomb, the wind drove the waves to tremendous heights with menacingly steep faces.

From the deck of a boat, or even from a helicopter, the waves looked like gigantic moving walls of green seawater. Like waves on a beach, they would curl and break, spewing clouds of white foam at the top. The trailing edges of the waves were even steeper than the faces. Successfully maneuvering a boat through these cliffs of water took extraordinary skill.

If the *Rambler* tried to steer directly up the face of one of these waves, the bow of the boat could be thrust up violently, upending the boat until it capsized. And steering down the sharp waves could end in *pitchpoling,* with the stern pitching forward over the bow and sinking the boat.

As the most experienced helmsman, Ed Psaltis took responsibility for steering the *AFR Midnight Rambler* through the waves. Memories of the 1994 race were very much on his mind. When *Nuzulu* capsized, Ed was trapped underwater. If the boat hadn't righted itself, he would have drowned.

That experience had scared the hell out of him. Ed knew that turning 90 degrees to the face of a wave meant that they might get rolled. Even more anxiety-provoking, the waves in '94 were only 30 to 40 feet. Now they were more than twice as high. Especially on a small boat, the helmsman can't afford to be sideways in the waves. Ed had learned that the hard way.

Ed was also thinking about the things that Australian sailing legend James Hardy had said about the disastrous 1979 Fastnet Race. Hardy had been one of Ed's idols since he was a boy, and Ed had read about his experiences. Hardy was the helmsman on a well-known boat named *Impetuous,* and he successfully steered *Impetuous* through a Force 10 storm in the '79 race.

Ed remembered the strategy Hardy used in that deadly race. *Take the waves at about 60 degrees, don't go straight into them. Go up into the wave as it approaches you, and pull over the top to avoid going into thin air. Then steer down the other side and back onto your course.*

What Hardy had done in the Fastnet worked for him, and what the Ramblers had tried in '94 didn't. They had been rolled. Ed's bad experience and Hardy's advice converged, and Ed developed a plan. He would steer up into the waves until he hit white water at the top, then slide

down the backside. For the next ten hours, Ed would repeat the mantra "*60 degrees, 60 degrees, 60 degrees*."

The wind was now blowing 60 to 70 knots, with stronger gusts of 80 knots or more. With the anemometer gone, there was no way to tell for sure. Jonno, for one, thought it was a blessing, since they couldn't quantify just how bad the conditions were. But regardless of the wind speeds, things were bad. When the strongest winds hit, they were engulfed in a whiteout and Ed was completely blinded at the helm.

The storm was unpredictable. At times the waves would drop to 20 or 30 feet, the height of a two- or three-story building. Waves like that were negotiable. Ed would start to relax, thinking, *We're getting over them okay, and we're in control.* Then, suddenly, a set of two or three or four of the 60-footers would come through and the Ramblers would be jolted into survival mode. It was a chaotic and erratic pattern: manageable waves and the feeling of relief, followed by a nasty set of green walls and white knuckles.

One of the most terrifying parts of the storm was the noise of the wind. It was like an old-fashioned teakettle, screaming with the sound of steam blasting from the spout—a high-pitched, deafening noise that never stopped. The only way the crew could communicate on deck was to stand next to each other, cup their hands, and shout until their voices were hoarse.

The Ramblers were not only frightened. They were freezing, wet, and some of the crew were seasick. They would throw up wherever they happened to be at the time. It wasn't a conscious act; it just happened. Normal bodily functions became unimportant. The only thing that mattered was survival.

Spray from the waves and the rain hit their faces like gravel pellets. Even with goggles, it was nearly impossible for Ed to face into the storm. But he had to know when the big waves were coming, so the Ramblers worked as a team and developed a system.

They agreed that two people would be on deck at any one time. The others would be below, protected from the storm. One person on deck would steer the boat as the helmsman, and the other would act as a *wave spotter.* The wave spotter had two responsibilities. One grueling job was to face into the storm, scanning the horizon for threatening waves. The second role was to act as a human shield, blocking the helmsman from the painful impact of the spray. With the wave spotter as his shield, the helmsman could crouch behind, ready to react when the time came.

The spotter's cry of "Bad wave!" would give the helmsman five to ten seconds to face into the storm, assess the danger, and make sure they had enough speed to maneuver over the wave. With the noise of the wind and the chaos of the storm, sometimes the spotter could shout only a single word—"big," "bad," or "wide." But that was enough. The system worked.

People below deck were living in another world. Cut off from the struggle above, they were isolated and terrified. But they found a way to stay connected. After shouting his warning to the helmsman, the wave spotter would bang on the cabin to alert those below. As primitive as the signal was, it was comforting to have this human connection—for those below to know that their mates on deck were still there, doing their jobs, and watching out for their safety.

Even with Ed's extraordinary skill, it was impossible to maneuver flawlessly over each wave. When the boat reached the top of a big wave, Ed was blinded by 10 to 15 feet of white foam, and sometimes he would pull away too late. *AFR Midnight Rambler* would launch off the wave and fly into space, hanging in the air until it hit the trough ahead of the next wave.

There were no backs to the sharp waves, so the boat would drop vertically, 30 feet or more. When it hit bottom, a shock wave would resonate throughout the boat. The mast, supported by the wire rigging, was already under extreme pressure. Everyone knew it could turn into a pile driver, and they waited to see what would happen.

It was especially frightening for those below deck. As the boat rocketed into the air, there would be nothing but silence, then a deafening noise as the boat hit the water. Arthur thought, *This is like being inside of a metal drum with someone bashing on the outside*. It was a terrifying experience, as they waited to see if the rigging would drive the mast through the bottom of the boat and water would start gushing in.

When Ed pulled away too late, the boat would fly off the back of the wave. But if he pulled away too early, the knockdowns were even worse. When the *Rambler* was at the top of the wave and got caught on the lip, the boat would slide back down the face of the wave. Anyone on deck would be engulfed by a solid mountain of water.

During one particularly bad knockdown, Ed grabbed onto his harness as a wave swept through the cockpit. The harness was attached to a strong point on the boat, but with the force of the wave, Ed couldn't

hang on. He was thrown to the back of the boat until he hit the stainless steel life rail.

Ed reached the end of his 6-foot harness and was jerked back, just as his ribs crashed into metal. The pain was intense, and he thought his ribs were broken. They were just badly bruised, not broken, and luckily the railing didn't break from the impact. Because of his harness, Ed was still inside the boat—more or less.

As the boat slid down the wave, everything that was horizontal suddenly went vertical. Everyone, whether on deck or down below, hung on for their lives. Chris, his arm still wrapped around the pipe next to his berth, was glued to his bunk, trying to make sure he didn't fall out and injure himself further.

Ed was still attached to the boat, but the *Rambler* was lying on its side and the cockpit was filled with water. The boat had completely lost momentum, and Ed could see another set of big waves coming at them. If the boat didn't get moving, they would be trapped. The next waves could hit the vulnerable, flattened boat, causing it to capsize and roll.

Floating helplessly in the water, Ed thought, *This is it. This time we've gone too far.* Desperate to avoid catastrophe, he clawed his way back into the cockpit and grabbed the tiller. Ed got the *Rambler* pointed in the right direction, and the sail filled with wind. He needed to get enough forward speed before the next wave hit, or it would be over.

Just in time, the boat started to move. Not fast, but enough to make it over the top. *AFR Midnight Rambler* had survived the knockdown and continued to sail into the storm.