

Lost at sea

Tales my grandfather would have told me. A sailor's life 1910-1941

A sailor's life – 61. Hurricane at sea

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Hurricane damage, Tampa dock, Florida,
October 1921 (Photograph: Burgert Brothers
collection, Tampa)

“During the afternoon the wind increased. My word, it did howl, it just shrieked past us and the rain came down in torrents unceasingly. A mountainous sea rose and the Pyrula, big ship that she is, was tossed around like a cork. Soon after 4pm four 10 gallon drums of coal tar got adrift in the fore ‘tween deck and then the fun commenced.

“She was capering around so much that she just threw them clean out of the lashings. The bosun managed to rescue two before they came to harm, but was a bit late with the other two. The bungs came out and oh! what a mess. Coal tar spread itself all over the deck and ran out of the scupper holes from where the wind whirled flying tar all over the place. Then, a heavy plank that was chocking off some drums of red lead and other paint in the lower fore peak collapsed, while in the top peak a barrel containing 500 weight of white paint got adrift. During a mad career around the deck it spilled half its contents and collided with a 10 gallon drum of black, so there was another queer mixture.



Fallen telegraph poles, Ybor City, Tampa, October 1921 (University of South Florida collections)

“It was impossible through all that rain to see further than the forecastle head. We were nearest the centre of the hurricane around 7 pm, after which the barometer began to rise. The sea was terrible – huge waves coming along from all sides. The vessel was buried in spray, but she did not ship a single sea until 7.30pm when she took a beauty. It came aboard practically the whole length of the vessel at the same time. One lifeboat was smashed, the galley skylight was washed off, several awning spars carried away and two beams buckled on the fore deck. To give you an idea of the size, let me say that the boats are all 45 ft above the water. A lot of water went down the engine room skylights and I expect some of the engineers thought their last day had arrived. After that things began to improve, although there was a tremendous sea running for 24 hours afterwards. When daylight came next morning I found my poor lifeboat sitting on top of a steam winch.”

Bert Sivell to Ena Whittington, from the Anglo-Saxon oil tanker Pyrula off Florida, October 1921

The unnamed hurricane, a category 4 with winds of up to 140mph, landed off the Caribbean near Tampa on 25 October and swept eastwards across Florida, [causing widespread destruction](#) as it slowed, although only six people were killed. Florida was still a sparsely populated fruit growing belt. Aboard Pyrula, rolling and twisting 150 miles away in the hurricane’s wake, one of the two stowaway kittens they’d picked up in Gibraltar was lost overboard.