

**THE GREAT GALE IN TABLE BAY
19TH JULY 1878**

by:- DR F K MITCHELL, F.S.A.N.S.

One of the most treasured pieces in my collection is a small handmade, hand-engraved, silver Maltese cross. It bears the inscription, half on one side, half on the other:-

**"Awarded to J MACPHERSON for Personal Bravery
The Great Gale in TABLE BAY : July 1878."**

If the ghost of Bartholomew Dias was around Table Bay on the night of 18th/19th July 1878, he must have wondered whether his original name "Cabo Tormentosa" - "The Cape of Storms" - was not more appropriate than King John's subsequent "Cape of Good Hope"! After three weeks of 'cold hard gales from the northwest, alternating with unseasonal south-east wind, on Thursday afternoon, 18th July, a dense south-east cloud wrapped the brow of Table Mountain like a pall.' Then 'driving down upon this great bank from above, there came clouds from the opposite quarter of the heavens, rolling back the dark mass; and in ten minutes a northerly gale whistled through the streets of Cape Town.'

'Squally gusts with occasional downpours marked the remaining hours of the afternoon and early evening, but when night broke the storm proper came. The elements seemed to be at total war. There were occasional brief lulls when the near-full moon struggled to shine through the clouds, but for most of the night there were roaring gale-force winds, with driving rain pelting down through impenetrable darkness, punctuated by flashes of lightning and deep claps of thunder.' It was 'the most cruel tempest which had visited these shores for eighteen years' wrote "The Cape Argus" reporter.

There were twelve vessels in Table Bay that night, nearly all anchored close enough behind the breakwater to get some shelter from the wild seas. They all appeared to ride out well through the first part of the night. But in the hour before midnight the squalls increased in fury. The 'CALEDONIAN', a bark of 607 tons, was lying in seeming security above the 'ETTA LORING' and 'REDBREAST'. For some weeks she had been leaking badly after a heavy gale in the South Atlantic and had put in to Table Bay for repairs. As the storm increased she dragged her anchor and began to roll heavily. In the early hours of the morning her cables parted and she was driven inexorably towards the shore. It was about 4a.m. when her blue distress lights were seen. Soon the doomed vessel, driven broadside before the gale, was grinding helplessly in the sands off Papendorp Beach (The original name Papendorp was later changed to "Woodstock."). The poop was broken to pieces by a crashing wave and the contents of the cabins strewn on the wild waters, but as the moon

momentarily illuminated the scene, the terrified seamen saw that these fragments were being swept out to sea. They saw no chance to swim to land. They could only cling to the rigging and pray for rescue from the shore.

Peter Raaff, a local fisherman, braving the storm to check his fishing gear, saw the ship's plight and heard the cries of the crew. Quickly he roused his neighbours and sent an urgent message in to town. With the help of a few fellow fishermen, he tried to get the life-boat out. One of the first persons roused was Mrs Brownie, one of the Malay fish-wives. As she helped to open the boathouse she could hear the mournful cries of distress from the ship. "It made her blood fall back cold upon her heart to hear them; and indeed", wrote the reporter, "what sound on earth is more pitifully desolate than the voice - rendered so weird and unearthly by the wild undulations of gale and surf - of a strong man appealing from the cruel sea to his fellow man?" ... "I could see de mens up in the riggin", said the old woman, "and when I hear dem crying 'Oh save us! God have mercy upon us!' it made my heart feel so sick dat I almost sink down."

Soon the boat was out. Willing hands helped launch it. Peter Raaff and his comrades struggled manfully to row through the surf to the stricken vessel. They managed to get a rope from the ship, but an enormous sea caused them to cut it and return to shore. Meantime Sergeant MacPherson of the Police, with three of his constables and a group of 'young Gentlemen' from the town had arrived on the scene. MacPherson took charge. He and the volunteers, including Constables Matheson, Peterson and Gordon Taylor, managed to pull the life-boat alongside the ship and secured a line. As five terrified seamen jumped into the boat, a huge sea hit it, and it capsized. All were thrown into the water, but as the boat righted herself, some regained her. Constables Taylor and Matheson grabbed two of the sailors and succeeded in getting them to shore. Sgt. MacPherson saw a youth trying to get to the boat, and then go down. He grabbed him and swam to the ship. He clung to a cable with the boy in his grasp, but seeing the boat gone and no help from aboard, he swam for the shore still holding the boy. On his way in he found an old coloured man struggling in the waves and managed to bring both man and boy in - luckily helped by a breaker just at shore which landed all three almost high and dry on the beach.

Meanwhile Constable Peterson and Carl Krumm, one of volunteers from the Town who had a business in Strand Street, managed to grasp a line from the ship. Krumm called up that he had a wife and four children dependent on him. He pleaded for help. "With a generous impulse the Captain responded 'I will, my man, for you've tried to save us,' and stooped over the side to haul him up. A tremendous breaker rolled over the ship at the instant and when the spray cleared away the Captain was gone." Poor Captain Thomas was a Welshman, a bachelor, an officer much respected by his men.

By desperate exertion and with some help from the crew, both Peterson and Krumm managed to clamber aboard, and await subsequent rescue. Miraculously all the life-boat party survived their perilous ordeal, and with the help, as full daylight came, of the Port life-boat and an artillery rocket-line and basket from the military, eleven of the crew of fifteen were saved. Three had joined the Captain in his watery grave. The cook, Harry Smith, had tried to swim ashore when the squalls were at their worst and was carried away. Two of the seamen were drowned when the life-boat capsized. According to a later report the bodies of the Captain and two of his crew were recovered within the next two or three days and given reverent burial.

As news of the disaster spread "the scene along the beach from the Town to Salt River was of the most exciting kind. Crowds of people were standing about Rogge Bay bewailing the sad fate of the ships which at the distance were seen with the sea washing over them. The sea had a most angry look, the bay was covered with breakers and a very strong undercurrent was driving landwards. The sky was like an inverted pewter-pot, its ashy hue being reflected on the waters below. The whole of the road between the town and Salt River was thronged with people." None of them would ever forget the scene!

The Cape Argus reported that "the names of the volunteer crew who so bravely went off in almost the hardest of the gale to the wrecked bark were Messrs. Dufton, F.C. Piers, H Woodhead, G Buyskes, B Gibson, George Stevens, Krumm, Von Tromp and Samuelson; and Sergeant MacPherson, Constables Gordon Taylor, Matheson and Peterson."

The storm continued for a full four days and a number of other vessels were wrecked or had to be beached. But trained rescue workers were on constant duty and no further lives were lost. The stranded seamen from the "CALEDONIAN", the French schooner "JEAN" and other casualties were taken to the Seamen's Home where they were cared for and clothed and given shelter, pending their chance to go back to sea.

The Public of Cape Town were generous in their assistance. On the 3rd of August "a benefit concert was held in the Theatre Royal in the presence of the Governor, Sir Bartle Frere. The fifteen life-boat volunteers who were seated together in the circle were called to the stage. Sir David Tennant, Speaker of the House of Assembly, and the Dean of Cape Town addressed the audience and then Sir David pinned a silver cross on the breast of each of the crew. The fifteen men were then taken to the Governor's box and introduced to him." They and their families were made to feel very proud!

These simple crosses are vivid reminders of the difficulties with which our forebears had to contend as the development of our country slowly progressed. They illustrate an important aspect of our history. Above all, they remind us of the perils

of the sea and of the heights to which brave men can rise when human lives are in jeopardy.

NOTE:- I know of the existence of six of these medals, as follows:-

H Woodhead (Later Lt. Col. Commanding the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles.) In a private collection.

Gerrit Albertus Buyskes
Africana Museum, Johannesburg.

C E Krumm S A Cultural History Museum, Cape Town.

J MacPherson (Sergeant of Police) My own collection.

A Peterson (Constable) National Museum, Bloemfontein.

A Rhoda (Presumably one of the fifteen recorded as having been presented, but not included in the 13 names recorded in The Cape Argus.) In private hands in Cape Town.



REFERENCES

1. The Cape Argus of the 20th and 23rd July 1878, from which I have quoted freely.
2. "Africana Curiosities", edited by Dr Anna Smith, Africana Museum.