

Ship Report Transcript

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By Joanne Rideout

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It's time for the ship Report the show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Wright out on taking a little bit of time off from the ship report. Oh, yesterday I said R and R, but actually it's working on my boat. I'm working really hard to get my boat in the water by the end of this week, and so I just needed to take a little bit of a break from the show. So I had more time to pour into this. A very important thing that is happening at least to me this week.

So we're going to dive back into the archives today. And hear a show that is dear to my heart because two of my very favorite people are in it:

Captain Deborah Dempsey, who was then at that time, at the time of this interview, was a Columbia River bar pilot and Terry Wilson, who years ago was Cameroon's engineer and also a Coast Guard and merchant Marine veteran.

It's really a treat to hear Terry's voice in this interview because Terry passed away a few years ago after many years of volunteering and working with KMUN in, he was always a delight to talk with.

They were both in the studio live with me one day during one of KMUN's pledge drives in the early 2000s, and we got onto the subject of rogue waves, which are those big waves that rise up in the ocean, seemingly out of nowhere to wreak havoc on ships that happen to be in their way. Before we hear this clip, a little bio about them. Deborah Dempsey is retired now, but for years she was and remains the only woman ever to have been a Columbia River bar pilot. Her life, in fact, has been full of firsts. She grew up in New England and was the first woman ever to attend the Maine Maritime Academy when she graduated as valedictorian of her class. She was the first woman to graduate from any maritime academy in the United States. Also, she was the first woman to receive a merchant marine unlimited master's license to be the captain of an oceangoing vessel. And she would end up being the first woman to sail as a master of an oceangoing ship. She's also a heck of a nice person and kindly came on the ship report as a guest many times over the years that she lived in Astoria. Terry Wilson, a former Coast Guardsman who also served as a radio officer on ships at sea, including a car carrier that he used to tell me about, worked at KAMU in Astoria for many years as the station's engineer. He's also a ham radio operator. Terry moved to the Seattle area in Washington. Few years back, and Deb Dempsey lives in Bellingham. So let's take a little trip back in time and hear this clip from our Talk on the air at KAMU in all about rogue waves.

Here's Deb Dempsey.

I have a personal experience. We were sailing. This is when I was with the Lykes Brothers Steamship Company and we were on the servicing the east coast of Africa and we were southbound going down the Agulhas current. And I was off watch in my bunk and I left my bunk when it fell out from under me. And of course, I got up and went up to the bridge to see what was up. And they estimate that the wave was about 60 foot. Whoa. And literally just the bottom of the ocean fell out from under the ship and it just fell. So that that's my personal experience.

JR: Holy smokes. So was that was the ship damaged?

DD: No, no, the ship wasn't damaged. But they do have damage with the bowels of ships. You could see you see photos of the bowels of the ships, actually curved up where they. Yeah. Coming, coming into Durbin or something like that. Mm hmm.

TW: My experience was in the Far East and it was time to get up to go have breakfast before I went on watch. And all of a sudden the ship went up and I was just - crawled. My legs were over the edge of the bunk. The boat was very high because our chest of drawers as such were on the bottom, you know. And I swung my legs over and we went down kind of like heavy G-force. Ooh. And then all of a sudden, the bottom fell out, and I found myself against the bulkhead nine feet away. It just the ship went down and move sideways, and bam, I crashed into a wall and.

JR: Wow. So and so these waves just sort of appear out of a comparatively calm sea, right?

DD: That's right. And that's a very, you know, the Indian Ocean with the exhaust current there, that's a very active area. So and I can't explain why they happened, but. Yeah.

JR: So is that something do you think that most oceangoing mariners with the experience that both of you have had the years there have encountered at least one, or is it that regular or that often that they happen? I don't think it's that often at all. That's the only time in my 18 years of going to see me two in 11 years.

TW: Well, it happens. It happens, you know, And it can be a 60 footer. It could be a 30 footer. It can be. We've heard about monster waves, you know, a hundred feet high, you know, and the ship broaching and rolling, you know. Hmm.

JR: I know that there's a statistic that I got actually from Captain Robert Johnson, who's also a Columbia River Bar pilot and works with Darby about that, that about 50 ships a year just disappear, that they just disappear. They don't get to port and maybe they get some kind of little strangled S.O.S. or no S.O.S., you know, And they don't really ever know what happens to them. And so the speculation is now that maybe this is part of the reason why some of these ships just never make it.

TW: I've been on watch. Received those messages. Hmm. This shot, this ship just is gone. Everybody watch out. And they give an approximate location to the Mariners in the ships in the area. Please watch out. See if you see if you see anything. Well, you know, it's so. The ocean is so vast. I mean, we're on land. We pretty much have everything under control, you know, with cell phones and everything else. But once you get about 60 miles offshore, it's a big empty, open space out there. That's just beautiful. Mm hmm. It is beautiful, but it's. But it's really on. I mean, it's not uncharted, but it's pretty much on controlled. You know? I mean, you're really on your own when you're out there in a vessel. That's the fun part.

My daddy always said about the ocean. It's totally unforgiving of human error. And when we lived in Long Beach, you know, we'd go surfing. You know, we're playing in the surf. And he says it's beautiful and it's gorgeous, and it we need it, but it's totally unforgiving of human error. Hmm. So was he a fisherman? No. He was a boater, though. Yeah. When he retired from boat, he became a charter boat skipper. And that's on small boats. Is the only time I've ever been seasick. Never on a big ship. But I explain to Joanne that I explained to Joanne that the I developed a salvation for me during storms is I started working and I would give the captain as much weather as I could and I had one captain say, I don't need all this. And I says, Well, if you keep me out, it'll keep the ship out of trouble. You keep me

out of trouble. And besides, if I give you too much, you can throw it away. But if I don't give you enough, we're in trouble.

JR: Well, I'm really relieved to hear that you really experienced folks get seasick. Although last time I went out on the Coast Guard, one of the Coast Guard boats, of course, it was pretty calm, but I didn't feel seasick at all. So maybe I'm getting over it. But, man, seasickness is really the pits.

So that was a clip from a live report on the air. It came U.N. sometime in the early 2000. And I was talking with Captain Deborah Dempsey at the time, working as a Columbia River bar pilot, and also Terry Wilson, former engineer at Kaim, U.N., who also served in the Coast Guard and as a radio officer on merchant ships. They were talking about rogue waves. Scientists who were famously skeptical about rogue waves, dismissing them as sea stories until 1995, when a rogue wave struck an oil installation in the Norwegian North Sea, equipped with a downward pointing laser. The platform recorded an 85 foot wave spiking out of a sea filled with 30 and 40 foot seas. It was caught on camera in a high resolution snapshot. This hard evidence turned maritime myth into fact. Researchers have since determined that rogue waves probably claimed 22 super carriers and more than 500 lives in the second half of the 20th century alone. You've been listening to the Ship Report show about all things maritime. I'm Joanne Rideout. Thanks for listening.

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