

## **Stormy Seas**

*By Christina Siciliano*

*Going to sea is going  
to prison with a chance  
at dying besides.*

***Samuel Johnson.***

Some time earlier this year I read a book, which told in powerful prose the horror of being caught at sea during a storm. The author Sebastian Junger describes waves as high as ten storey buildings . . . massive impenetrable walls of water “The Perfect Storm” is a book you cannot put down. Before the last page had been turned I was convinced that this book should be compulsive reading for all who offer hospitality to seafarers.

On land most of us work in buildings that have been made safe according to a myriad of standards. Today the workplace is subject to a host of rules and regulations. We are workplace regulated for safety as at no other time in history . . . nothing is left to chance one, accident is one too many. The fire brigade and ambulance are a mere telephone call away. We are fortunate, unlike those who work at sea. At anytime changing weather conditions which are not subject to rules and regulations and standards may render seafarers and their craft helpless: with twenty years being the average age of shipping world wide seafarers are at a definite disadvantage. The following is an eyewitness account of a storm in which a ship was lost.

The night of Tuesday July 24 of this year was cold and frosty, it was the kind of weather that makes you glad to be indoors. A large number of seafarers had arrived at Stella Maris, happy to be in a warm place. Giuseppe Silverio introduced himself, an unpretentious man with dark slightly grey flecked hair, he was the Master of the MSC Peggie: during the course of our conversation a most amazing story unfolded.

Giuseppe announced, “I broke a ship in two.” In disbelief, I repeated his words “yes . . . yes” he said, and described his ship’s battle with the elements and how it eventually split in two, completely separated in a storm with an eleven – twelve classification.

“It was blowing a gale”, Giuseppe said “the wind was maybe between one hundred and forty five to one hundred and fifty kilometres per hour, by evening it had whipped the waves up to fifteen to twenty metres”, Giuseppe’s ship the *MSC Clara* rode the waves high . . . then plummeted into the troughs . . . then just as suddenly

the ship pitched and rolled in the enormous seas . . . a big pump in the engine room got rid of the water . . . all had been made secure.

Then on 24 November 1997 at two hundred and eighty metres off the coast of the Azores the ship developed a hair line crack which split the vessel in two . . . thankfully it was a clean break, had it not been, the ship would have smashed against itself. All the crew were in the cabin and engine area which remained afloat . . . they were all safe.

Giuseppe thought that he was dreaming . . . but it was reality. “God exists . . . he calmed the wind and the seas for us”. On November 25 a helicopter managed to winch each member of the crew to safety. Giuseppe was the last to be winched from the ship.

The next day the sea again became mountainous, it would have been impossible to carry out any form of rescue.

A man who has faced death . . . a man like the Master . . . a man of enormous strength of character and faith said “we are under one God . . . my faith is strong and as time goes by it gets stronger”

There were of course numerous newspaper articles, television interviews . . . they were celebrated. The Master was blameless and it is to his credit that all his crew survived. He followed all the correct procedures.

The Master from Sant Agnello, one kilometre from Sorrento in Italy’s south comes from a sea faring family, Giuseppe said “ the sea is in my blood” his grandfather and father, were seafarers, his brothers are Masters of ships also, his brother in law and cousins earn their living at sea . . . and their wives and families wait and watch the horizon for their return.

There is an old Neapolitan song. “Ritorno a Sorrento” the words go something like this . . . look at the sea how beautiful it is . . . at times – though, it is a treacherous beauty. ❧