

THE STORM

Special report from Andy Myers in Darwin NT about a fishing trip he's still trying to forget.

By now it would be abundantly clear I am a planner.

Having just seen my brother in law's latest visit off after two successful trips on consecutive weekends, the only minor challenge left in the season was a visit a fortnight later by my own brother, Peter. So where to

head to this time? I had watched the Darwin radar closely for the last month, and pulled the right strings for the brother in law's visit.

For Peter's visit, and given the preceding weeks of research, I looked at it this way, the easiest option was to head to the Peron's and or Cape Ford, with the

probability of getting a good sort of a storm I rated at not less than 95-99%.

Option #2: Steam back out to Flat Top Bank with quite a few other boats I knew were heading out, odds of getting a storm relative to option one, say 1-5%. In hind sight this was still a very good call



Original illustration by Greg ("Greggo") Richardson for PAB 2, in 2002

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based on probabilities, however as a more learned associate pointed out to me, what I missed was the likelihood of surviving the 1-5% if it went pear shaped!

OK, the die was cast, we went to Flat Top. After about 40km, we had a great trip out for the rest of the trip and brilliant water colour, heaps of fish and nooooo sharks, *yippy yahoo!*

About 10:00 pm we went to bed with just a few very distant flashes of lightning or as Andre prefers "the photographer", which seemed very slowly getting closer. I didn't sleep at all that night due to a bit of chop and about 2:00 am Peter woke and enquired if some preparations were in order as things had progressed somewhat with the storm's proximity.

Still a 'No' from me, as I still steadfastly believed the storm wouldn't get the 130km out to us, given all the indications so far this build up. 2:30am came and went. Okay, let's take down the rods and pack up the beds; we will stay put for a few minutes more.

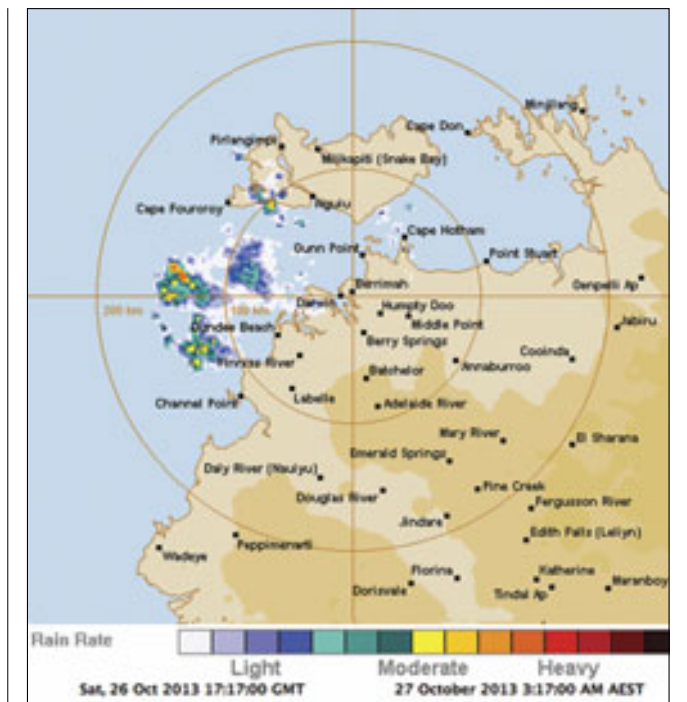
Finally, at 3:00am, we

could start to see the rain line between the sea horizon and the cloud bank. We were going to cop it big time.

I check a bearing for a run back to Dundee across it, around 110 degrees, oops straight at it. Perhaps the Peron's and some other grounds to fish Sunday at dawn might be an option. Unfortunately, that was only 10 degrees more to the south ((as we were so far out), bugger, still straight into it. I decide to run SSW quartering away from it, to the bottom of the Banks further away from where we were anchored up to the north of the main bank.

We got the strobe light onto the anchor float and got the pick up, and were quickly on our way. These storms rarely, if ever, drift south, so it all so depended on how broad the front was. The course was a hard one given the bit of slop and we didn't break any records making way on a very dark night.

After only 7 km (and I will never forget the feeling.... ever) I felt the most horrible burst of cold air on the back of my neck and the air suddenly smelt of rain, our run south was



over. It was time to turn and face into it, and push back through the front.

The rain was a white out from the start and the wind was straight to its peak. The sea built immediately, and between the two, and at night, direction was pretty irrelevant. Holding the bow into it was almost impossible, shouted directions from crew help but it is still feeling like an onslaught on the senses from all directions. We spent a lot of time at an angle of approach up those waves of sixty degrees or more and in

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honesty were probably getting pushed backwards over the ground for much of that time.

Usually lightning is the big fear for me, and I have been in at least five or six cracking build-up or knock-em down storms in my time here in the NT. This time however, once that wind started I don't even remember if there was any lightning, (and I am assured there was), my hands were too full already.

Andre announced he was off down to the cockpit to jamb the scuppers open as we were up to the side pockets back there. We stayed like this for twenty minutes or so, just dealing with it as the sea built more and more.

Our biggest concern wasn't surviving for a while in the storm (as such) it was surviving for a couple more hours till dawn without doing anything wrong or something breaking.

In my honest opinion it didn't seem possible to me that the ocean could settle down in just a couple of hours, given the current sea state. Usually once the rain starts, the sea gets pushed down a bit, but not

this one.

I don't reckon we were that close to a 'go bad and losing it' at any stage until then, but the probability of surviving another couple of hours of this ferocity, was very, very low. Vision was virtually nil, the waves becoming even higher, shorter and more vertical, and the boat was pitching violently almost at the whim of the elements.

About ten minutes in, the life jackets came out, signalling another milestone had been reached for me.

By then, when we lumbered up the crest of some of the bigger waves that had doubled up to say three metres of breaking surf, we would end up with a little air under us.

Essentially in that situation I believe that when the wind and wave hit together it felt like we were put down facing another direction, again away from the wind and our original heading, which definitely didn't help our situation or confidence. It was testament to the boat and its builder, and crew that we got back to the right heading before we met with disaster.

I think we all perceived a

slight abatement to it after about twenty-five minutes, but nobody was game to mention the prospect for another five minutes at least.

Eventually (despite my earlier undertakings with the almighty), we were soon able to turn north away from our homeward course back on a more northerly course to our original fishing grounds. Finally the storm (as they all seem to up here), just passed us by.

As incredible as it might seem, we dropped the pick in calm water where we had been at the first inkling of the storm, just one hour twenty minutes after it overtook us. I was completely stuffed after the effort of the last 24 hours and was asleep straight on the deck even before Andre got back from the foredeck after dropping the pick!

Another smaller boat, a six metre GS Marine Extreme reported being unable to hold into the waves at all. It was a rear centre console and was just being overwhelmed as green water just filled them up straight over the bow. They were left with no choice but to turn and try to run with it, arse onto the

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sea letting the waves wallow underneath them, not a great strategy in my book, but better than sinking as their pumps were no show of keeping them afloat.

The down side was they were in it much longer than us. Pretty quick thinking on their part given the time of day, the situation, they had their life jackets on, the rest of the gear in a bag tied to the skipper and all three of them tied together. In all honesty, us old blokes could have thought a bit quicker about our plan for the 'what if' possibility.

There were some bigger boats out there as well, Arafura Blue Water Charters 14 metre boat was out there, and

sounded like they broke their bottom tackle away in the midst of trying to stay anchored. They ended up having to deal with punters on the back deck spewing and called it at 45kn + when we had a yak to them after it was over. The young skipper had it pegged as "a bit insane there for a while" and I reckon he isn't a bad judge.

I have thought about it a lot since we got back and can honestly say that at age forty eight and after being at it since I was about five years old, if it had been any worse it would have been my last fishing trip right there.

Suffice to say it was not real good at all out there that night/morning, and

being in the middle of that, and 130km offshore is not something I will forget in a very long time. I made one major error after committing to go out there. It is surprising, too, because I'm normally onto it.

You see, those bigger boats (like Arafura's 14m charter boat) can see this stuff a long way off and plot its track on their radar. You can get the info off them by VHF and make an informed decision earlier on about the best strategy to steer well out of the danger zone. I simply didn't think it would get out that far. The charter guy sounded like he got caught asleep anyway, so at least if I'd asked him about the radar prognosis via our VHF radios, I may have

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woken him, and he might have had a bit more time himself.

The main thing is we survived as did everybody else out there, though given the size of some of the boats I am very surprised and relieved they all did. I will be rehashing some procedures and reassessing the finer points of life jacket placements and accessories like lights, (etc) before we go again.

Most of all in future the boat will be sitting on the hard after about mid October and not getting her toes wet before the start of April from now on.

TBM