

## THE STORM OF THE CENTURY

I was giving the closing lecture at the annual meeting of the Lawyer-Pilots Bar Association at the Doral Hotel in Miami, after which most of the members planned to go to their aircraft and set out for airports across the country. I was about to end my speech and wish them Godspeed and fair skies to their respective destinations, when suddenly I was handed a note at the podium. I read it with alarm.

“Hold on, you people,” I said. “I’ve just been handed a SigMet, and you need to hear it. A severe storm with very high winds has made up, and is headed right across south Florida and into the Bahamas. You need to cancel your flight plans, and get hangar space for your airplanes if you can. If not, you need to tie them down hard and tight, right now! Meeting adjourned!! ! Go!!!

As an airman for forty years (at that time - now fifty-eight) and a yachtsman for almost that many, I have developed an innate awareness of the present and expected weather wherever I am, for by the weather in those two environments you may live or die. The forecast I was given was one of the most frightening I have ever seen, and I have spent a lot of time dealing with hurricanes, thunderstorms, fog, icing, and other unpleasant weather conditions. I say frightening because our ability to deal with weather problems - whether on land, at sea or in the air - is totally dependent on some reasonable foreknowledge as to what conditions are expected.

A rogue storm, as this one proved to be, is scary because it leaves little if any time to prepare, and our only defense to weather is to be prepared for it as best we can, be it a thunderstorm, a cyclone (that is, hurricane, or a typhoon as they are called in the Pacific) or a tornado. It was clear from the moment that I read that note forecasting an imminent doomsday that many would suffer damage, injury and perhaps death because there was almost no time to get ready. Happily, the pilots to whom I was speaking made their arrangements efficiently and quickly. None of them suffered any damage of consequence.

But across the Gulf Stream, on the west side of the Bahama Bank, a famous restaurateur, was making his way west to the South Coast of Florida in a venerable but sturdy forty-seven-foot wooden ketch. His name was Chuck Muir, and he was the principal of famous restaurants from Michigan to Florida, known variously as “Joe Muir’s”, “Charley’s Crab”, and “Chuck & Harold’s”. All of these eateries had (and still have) wonderful reputations for high-quality food and service, and Chuck was a man much beloved in the South Florida community, and beyond. He was also an able and experienced yachtsman, who if given half a chance could survive almost any adversity.

But on this day in 1992, that half chance was denied him. Although I hardly knew him personally, I haven’t the slightest doubt that he was in severe straits before he ever appreciated his plight. As airmen and yachtsmen, we usually get and depend upon getting some kind of warning about ominous weather phenomena coming at us. In all probability, Chuck got blind sided. Whether he ever had time to douse his sails and put up a storm trysail, no one will ever know. Somewhere between the edge of the Bahama Bank and the coast of South Florida, he disappeared with all aboard. There was some evidence that he was calling the police on his cellphone during the night, which would have put him within twenty or thirty miles of Florida’s shore under normal conditions. But nothing about what came to be called “The Storm of the Century” was normal, and whatever the significance of the phone call - if there was one - is forever lost.

I was one of the many who had enjoyed the Muir culinary magic - especially in seafood dishes, which is generally their specialty - for many years before this tragedy occurred. I had a couple of airplanes at the time, and we put them in the air for many hours to supplement the Coast Guard's efforts to search for any clue - life vest, broken wooden spar, piece of sail, crumpled remnant of a raft, anything at all that might lend a clue as to what had happened, and where. But the sea gave up nothing, nothing at all. Chuck Muir - however he perished - will be long remembered with affection. He will also serve as a grisly reminder to those who go down to the sea in ships, as Masefield put it, that Mother Nature, whatever her wonders, can be terribly unfair.



