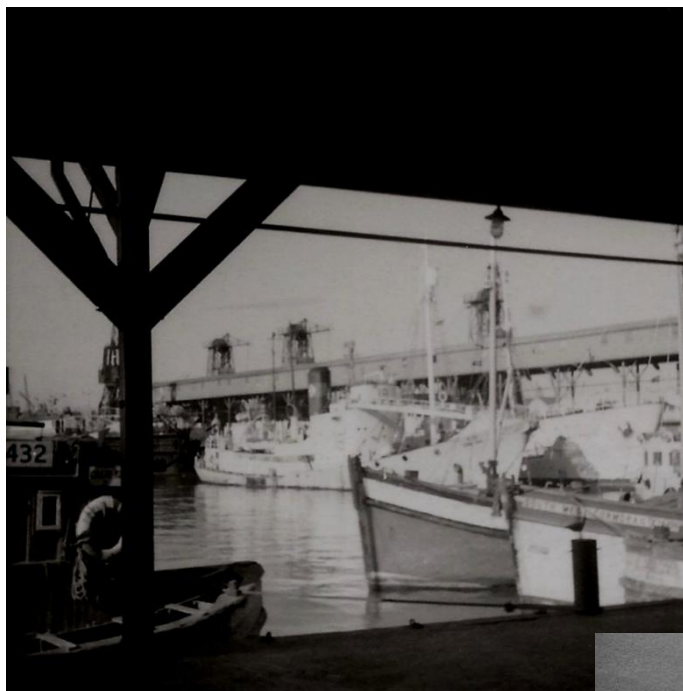


On board a weather ship in the South Atlantic



Michael Pierre de Villiers

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Title page: The weather ship in Cape Town harbour and at sea showing the Edwin Cook's bridge as seen from the crow's nest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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Circa 1970, I was temporarily based in Cape Town to serve on the weather ship. The ship was a slightly modified whale catcher belonging to the Union Whaling Company in Durban chartered by the then South African Weather Service (SAWB), now the South African Weather Service.

As a child living on the Durban Bluff, I remember the smell that would come up from the whaling station factory on the seaward side of the Bluff when they were processing whales. In the whaling season, we would sometimes walk down to the slipway from where we lived to watch them being brought ashore. The whaling season spanned the winter months from March to September when whales migrated northward at the beginning of the Antarctic winter and then south again at the end of winter.



Sperm whales on the slipway at the Bluff.

Migrating whales were caught in the sea nearby, about 100-150 nautical miles offshore. The harpooned whales had compressed air pumped into them so that they would float. The whalers would then come into harbour with their floating catch tied to the sides of the ship, which attracted many sharks. The ships then manoeuvred to the slipway on the harbour side of the Bluff, between the entrance and the coaling wharf near the Wests Railway Station. At the slipway, they were then winched onto flatbed railway trucks and a steam locomotive would pull the train around to the processing station. Among other uses, whale extract was used in the manufacture of cooking fat, margarine, soap, machine lubricant, cosmetics and animal feed.

In the late 60's and early 70's, the whaling industry was in decline, due to the general prohibition on the killing of whales (the industry came to an end in Durban in 1975) and the ships were available for other use. Before the use of satellite imagery and the deployment of ocean data buoys, the then SAWB (now SAWS) had a distinct problem in that to the west of the country, where most of the weather originated, there was little, or no, information. Apart from the observations at Gough Island and the irregular reports from ships, there was very little information on which to base weather forecasts. It was decided to use a converted leased whale

catcher as a floating observation post. The conversion of the ship consisted of adding a three sided wooden balloon shed on the stern deck, with the open side facing astern. The shed was

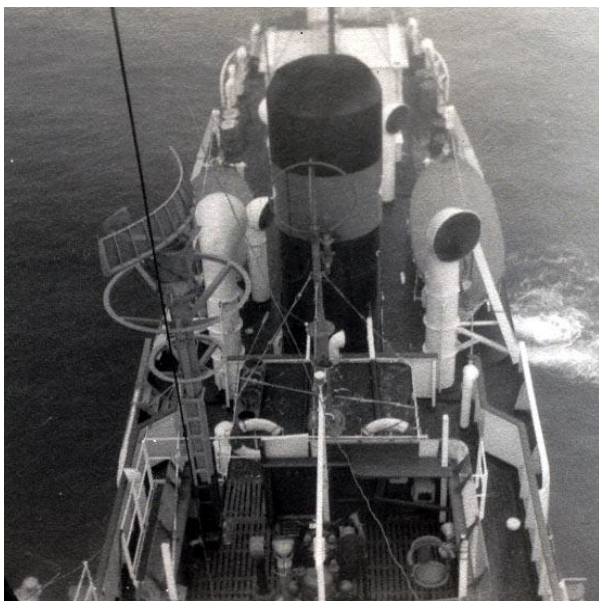


The Edwin Cook in Cape Town harbour.

used to fill the balloon with hydrogen from a cylinder then launch the balloon with an attached radiosonde transmitter for daily atmospheric soundings.

Other than that, a cabin was allocated as an office with a receiver and plotting table. The resulting coded data was transmitted by radio to South Africa. Daily duties also consisted of coded weather observations, which included visual observation of swell and sea conditions, as well as sea temperature. The sea temperature was measured by lying on the edge of the lowest part of the deck, which was not far above sea level, while holding a thermometer, at arm's length, in the water over the ship's side. This could be tricky in rough conditions.

The vessel would sail to 40°S 10°E remaining on station for about 3 weeks at a time and then return to port. The vessels used, at different times, were first the Edwin Cook and later the F. H. Hughes, based in Cape Town. I sailed on the 608 gross tonnage Edwin Cook. Apparently, after it returned to the Union Whaling Company, during 1972, the Edwin Cook nearly sank. After hunting off Margate, on the KwaZulu-Natal south coast and south of Durban, it was towing her catch of four whales to Durban in heavy sea and was just off the Bluff. The harpoon in a rolling whale pierced the ship's hull. The ship was in danger of sinking before the hole could be plugged and water pumped out. Beaching on the shore of the Bluff was contemplated (Jackson, 2005).

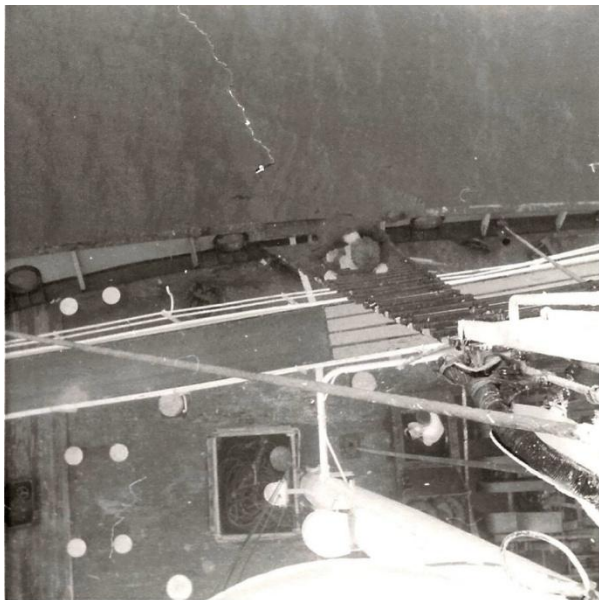


The Edwin Cook seen from the crow's nest in a flat sea. Open bridge in the foreground, shed visible on stern deck. On the bow, the Chief Engineer next to the harpoon gun.

The ship was also fitted with a Boersma ocean wave recorder, which was operated on behalf of the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. Later it was replaced by a National Institute of Oceanography recorder. The motion recording element, fitted to the ship's hull, recorded a paper trace on equipment in the office from which wave height and period could be extracted. The wave direction was visually determined using the ship's compass. From September 1969 to March 1974 the F H Hughes was used. The F H Hughes, was deliberately sunk 8km off Durban in a naval exercise (Jackson, 2005). The vessel had put in 25 years of service and was sunk on 19 December 1975, joining many other vessels which have shared the same fate near Durban.

At 40°S one was on the edge of the roaring forties. That is, the westerly winds that exist uninterrupted from the tip of South America, across the southern Atlantic Ocean to Australia. These winds could really howl along and with deep low pressure systems, generate mountainous seas. My first experience of this wild sea, was sitting in the mess watching from the porthole. First one saw a gloomy and grey sky when the ship rose up to the swell and then a dark green wall of water when the ship dipped and a wave crashed over the entire ship, bridge and all. I remember nervously looking from crew member to crew member. They looked relaxed, so I assumed it was OK. There was a semi open bridge and the helmsman had to be attached to the wheel to keep his footing while keeping the ship's bows steaming into the sea. He was regularly subjected to drenching. After a while he would be replaced by another helmsman. So, it went on until the sea subsided.

Best at these times was the storm soup. A huge pot would be clamped on the stove and food would be thrown in almost whole, then cooked. One got big chunks of meat, potatoes, etc. It tasted tremendous. Followed by ice cream. The cook was also a master at preparing curry and rice. Either a mild Malay recipe, or a fire extinguisher on standby hot curry.



A colleague climbing the rigging.



In fog on a smooth sea.

At other times the water was so still it was like glass. By timing the rolling of the ship, one could then climb the rigging to the crow's nest. When it rolled toward the opposite side one climbed. When it rolled back toward one, one held on until it rolled away again. At times like this, with not a breath of wind, it was amusing to watch the big Great Wandering Albatross. They would go running for ages across the water with wings flapping, trying to get enough

speed and lift to get airborne. They were fascinating and amusing birds. I once watched one glide for over a half an hour without once flapping its wings. In the light wind, it simply used gentle updrafts on the windward side of the low swell to maintain height. Soaring at its most magnificent.



Albatross's scrapping for food.

An amusing trait was that the Albatross's would float around waiting for the kitchen refuse to be turfed overboard. The first bird to get there would then begin to eat. At the same time, it would try to prevent any others from getting food. With the motion of the sea, the floating food would spread further apart along the side of the ship and the bird would spend its time going up and down chasing away the others that grabbed at the food. Consequently, the silly bird spent its time going backward and forward, getting no food at all.

The sailors would put lines out over the side to catch fish. On one occasion they caught a smallish Great White Shark. On another occasion an Albatross was found in the morning with a hook caught in its mouth. The bird was brought on board and the hook removed. Surprisingly, the bird was extremely docile and clumsy while on the deck, possibly terrified. One could tweak its beak and generally inspect it. Its wing span was about four metres across. However, when it was lowered over the side and it touched water, it was a different matter entirely. One had to get hands clear quickly, because it began snapping in all directions.

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A Great White Shark on deck.



A Great Wandering Albatross on deck.



Home again. Approaching Cape Town.

Returning back to Cape Town, navigation became easy. In the dark the previous evening the flashing light from the Cape Point Lighthouse became faintly visible on the horizon.

Reference

Jackson, A. 2005. Whaling in Durban. [Facts About Durban - Whaling in Durban \(fad.co.za\)](http://FactsAboutDurban-WhalinginDurban(fad.co.za)). Accessed 2013-01-15.