



Against All Odds: The Epic Story of the Oceanos Rescue

Andrew Pike

Publisher: Jonathan Ball, South Africa. 2019. 242 pgs

Review by Martin Nicol

The *Oceanos* was a cruise ship with 600 passengers that sank in a severe storm off the coast of the then Transkei in 1991. Everyone was rescued (including a dog and a canary). No one died. “Against all odds” is the title of an enthralling book about the disaster by Andrew Pike. He is a lawyer specialising in marine law who represented the owners of the ship. Years later he has added this first-hand knowledge to interviews of survivors and newly discovered facts about why the ship sank.

In October 2021, I spent a ten day camping holiday at Bulungula - an estuary just 10 km from where the *Oceanos* sank, where there is a tourist lodge operated by the local community. Even today, almost 30 years after the *Oceanos* rescue, this is an extremely remote place. Deep river gorges mean that the main N2 “coastal highway” is 60 or 100km inland. Rutted, bouldered, unmaintained roads run down steep land spurs to scattered villages along the sheer ocean cliffs. Travel to the metropolis of Mthatha takes three hours of jarring, jolting, discomfort - and much longer if roads are wet and rivers flooded. You don’t have to camp: there are traditional mud huts with beds and curtains (amazingly decorated), and a lodge library — with the Diaries of Samuel Pepys — and there is solar energy for your cell phone charger.

The *Oceanos* was on a cruise from East London to Durban. But it got into trouble in the “foreign” waters of the independent Transkei apartheid “homeland”. The Transkei, then under the rule of General Bantu Holomisa, could not consider mounting a sea rescue. It had “no assets, insufficient manpower and no experience”.

The Department of Transport of the apartheid government of the time was responsible for maritime issues, but it was not prepared. In the years of tourism boycotts, cruise ships had been rare. The government had “never planned fully for the sinking of a passenger ship” (p.192)

The sea was too rough to launch all the lifeboats, as the *Oceanos* began to list and as night fell. And those in the lifeboats faced a perilous time in the dark, plunging ocean, waiting for merchant ships to approach and then being battered along the sides of these huge vessels as the waves rose and fell. Passengers who could not fit in the lifeboats (some of which were taken away half full by the crew!) were rescued the next morning. One by one, they were lifted into SA defence force helicopters which had been sent 100s of kilometres from Durban and Pretoria. (OK, the Department of Transport did have resourceful leaders at its base at Silvermine, Cape Town, who called in for urgent help).

Incredibly, the captain of the ship sat idly by as the entertainment consort of magicians, musicians and singers organised the passengers on deck and spoke to rescue vessels on the radio.

Policy Point for New Agenda:

One wonders whether a cruise ship in difficulty today off the same part of the Wild Coast would have the same luck?

Today we have a sophisticated integrated National Disaster Management Centre in place, we have the Disaster Management Institute of Southern Africa, as well as world-class risk management legislation, and we have the helicopters bought as part of the 1999 arms deal.

But General Holomisa is now in Parliament. He has no power to approve helicopter rescues, or to meet the helicopters in person at the then Umtata Airport as he did in 1991. And surely supply chain issues would require three independent quotes before any expenditure of disaster funds could be considered for approval. Twenty hours would not be enough time and it was on a weekend. The last person, a navy diver, was hoisted off the *Oceanos* barely 90 minutes before it sank – all the deck chairs tumbling in a rush into the waves as the ship suddenly up-ended. The rescue was totally against all odds. **NA**