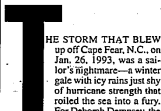


# We Will Save This Ship

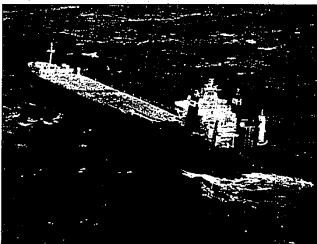


THE STORM THAT BLEW up off Cape Fear, N.C., on Jan. 26, 1993, was a sailor's nightmare—a winter gale with key rains just shy of hurricane strength that rolled the sea into a fury.

For Deborah Dempsey, the captain of the transport ship *Lykes*, it was a good day to be home on land, far from the anger of the waves. Dempsey, 45, has had a distinguished history at sea. In 1989, she became the first American woman to captain a merchant vessel in international waters. Her service aboard the *Lykes*, the newest ship in the Lykes Line fleet, had been memorable: In 1990 and 1991, Dempsey had sailed the *Lykes* six times to the Persian Gulf with military supplies—the first woman captain of a Merchant Marine vessel in wartime.

But now the *Lykes* was to be sold. After her duties were completed on board, Captain Dempsey had left her post and thought she had seen the last of the 634-foot ship as it was pulled out to the open sea by tugboats, on its way to New Orleans. Dempsey barely had settled in at the Virginia home she shares with her husband, Jack, 65, a retired Lykes captain, when the storm hit. Her bag was still packed with gear and clothing when the phone rang at 9:30 that Tuesday morning with the worst news a captain can hear: The *Lykes*, under tow, had broken loose in the rough sea northeast of Cape Fear. The ship—with 387,000 gallons of oil on board to run its engines. If needed—was being pushed off by the windward lead, threatening an ecological disaster and the loss of 57 crew members.

There was one more problem: "There was no crew on board," Dempsey ex-



Crucial: The 634-foot *Lykes*, carrying 387,000 gallons of oil, floats unmoored on the Atlantic near Wilmington, N.C., after breaking loose from a tugboat.



**Debbie Dempsey was the first American woman to captain a merchant vessel in international**

**waters. Now her ability would be tested to the limit.**

"I've always loved the water." After graduating from the University of Vermont in 1971, Debbie delivered yachts up and down the East Coast—one of the few sailing jobs a woman could find in those days. Then, in 1974, she heard that the nation's maritime academies—five state-run schools, plus the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy—were considering whether to admit women. She applied to the Maine Maritime Academy before it even officially changed its policy. "I had my interview on a Tuesday, and the board of trustees voted to admit women on Thursday," she says.

Even though it would mean repeating college—cranking virtually a full curriculum into 2½ years and earning a second bachelor's degree—she jumped at the chance. "I love working on water," Dempsey says. "If it's floating, I'm happier." Six years older than her classmates, she proved her mettle despite a cool reception from other students. "There was some jealousy and resentment," she recalls, "but I went through school with blinders on. I had the support of the faculty and admin-

The night was pitch black. The unmanned ship lurched wildly as a fierce storm churned the sea. The captain and her crew had little time to avert disaster.

istration, and I was 100 percent focused." In 1976, Debbie Donne became the nation's first woman to graduate from a maritime academy. She was the top student in the nautical science program. Since then, she has risen through the ranks from deck to captain, usually as the first woman to hold each rating. Dempsey says her fellow mariners have been largely supportive. "If I have a problem with gentlemen closest to my age," she explains, "it's not my problem—it's their problem. People senior to me and younger people are supportive."

One of those senior people is Jack Dempsey, her husband of 15 years. On that January morning, he knew his wife was being asked to do something no captain had done before—to fly through treacherous weather in a helicopter, to land on the deck of an unmanned ship pitching wildly in a rough sea and, with a small crew of volunteers, to somehow stop the *Lykes*. "I had faith in her," Jack recalls. "I knew what she could do."

Assuming that she and her crew could somehow get aboard the ship, Captain Dempsey had only one option that would stop its drift: to let down both 5½-ton anchors. The procedure, however, is dangerous. "Basically, if you're in a situation where you have to use two anchors," she says, "you don't anchor."

When Dempsey reached Wilmington, N.C., she found an all-volunteer

BY MICHAEL RYAN

Marine helicopter crew waiting to carry her out to the ship. "She was in the trough," says Dempsey, describing the ship's position. "She was doing 35-degree seas rolls."

Lurching wildly in the water, the *Lyra* was no place to land a helicopter. The four crew members were lowered in a basket, one at a time, making hard contact with the pitching deck.

Dempsey had been given a cellular telephone and portable radios to keep in contact with land. None of them worked. Twice, the emergency generator—which would provide power to drop the anchors and light the ship—failed after the first anchor had been lowered. Darkness fell. "There is nothing blacker than a ship dead in the water in a storm at night," she says, adding: "I like challenge. The more there is, the more I like it."

That night, she faced the greatest challenge of her career: Dempsey and her crew had to let down the second anchor without any power from the sea.

"I love working on the water," she says. "If it's floating, I'm happier."

The chief engineer leaped on the brake, and nothing happened," she recalls. "We burned out the brake."

Dempsey knew she had

only one last chance to save the ship.

"There's a device called the riding paw, a huge chunk of steel," she explains. "When you're picking up the anchor, it drops down inside the links of the chain to keep them from slipping backward." This time, Dempsey had to hope that, if she threw the riding paw, it would slip into a link and stop the chain. "Either it was not going to pay attention at all," she says, "or it was going to disintegrate and take me off the deck with it, or it was going to stop the chain, and everything would be fine."

The riding paw worked. Around midnight, 16 miles from the mainland, the *Lyra* stopped its deadly drift. "We did the job we were trained to do," Dempsey says. "It was a team effort." After the storm, Dempsey and her crew rode the *Lyra* under tow into Charleston harbor and left the ship forever.

Debbie Dempsey is back at sea now as skipper of the *Margaret Lyster*, a larger, older vessel than the *Lyra*. She has received an award from the Seaman's Church Institute for saving the *Lyra*. She remains slightly embarrassed by the attention. "It could have been a disaster," she concedes. "But it never entered my mind that we would not anchor that vessel. I never thought we would't stop the ship."



Deborah Doane (l) and family on her graduation day in 1978 at the Maine Maritime Academy. She was the top student in the nautical science program.

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