

The Professional Captain: Cruising Chronicles of Captain Don Fleming

Captain Don Fleming is well known on the Hudson River and Long Island Sound for his on-board training in docking, maneuvering, navigation, and electronics. He holds a USCG Master of Oceans license for power and sail up to 100 tons and has over thirty years experience as a professional captain and as an educator. He is available for private onboard instruction. For additional information visit www.captaindonfleming.com or call 914-941-3998



"GO," OR "NO GO"

It was already dark, and the lightning flashes in the west were looking pretty severe as we headed out of Northport Bay on the north shore of Long Island. I was completing a night navigation run, a final exercise combining GPS and RADAR, with a client who had taken several sessions of extensive training

with me. We were heading back to the New York Athletic Club Yacht Club in Pelham Manor, New York, a run of approximately twenty-five miles.

It had been one of those difficult "go, or no go" weather calls that seemed to have plagued

my schedule last year more than most. The forecast during the day was for a "scattered thunderstorm watch throughout the region, with some potentially severe." As I fretted during the day I considered that the boat, a True North Fast Trawler of recent vintage, could



True North Fast Trawler: capable of handling a severe thunderstorm, if necessary.

handle a severe storm if necessary. It's the model with the nearly vertical plumb bow, tumble home stern quarters, and long reverse sloping transom—reminiscent of classic Chesapeake Bay workboats. Its low profile hull with deep vee forward and flat run aft combined with a heavy duty skeg is designed to cut through steep seas. The four hundred twenty horsepower single Yanmar diesel coupled to a large prop inside the skeg provides ample power. A good boat for riding out a storm.

Other factors contributing to my decision to eventually "green light it" were the proven Raymarine electronics package, the quality build of the boat, and, most importantly, the attitude of the owner. In previous sessions Bob, a Wall Street trader from Larchmont, had proven himself to be a serious student, a guy who respected the power of the sea and understood his family was counting on him to have the skill and confidence to handle the boat in adverse conditions, should he encounter them.

A late afternoon phone call to Bob resulted in a plan to meet at the boat at 8:00 p.m. to make a final weather check before departing. We met as planned, and the forecast remained unchanged.

So, off we went, by mutual consent, at dusk for a quick run, and a planned 11:00 p.m. return. We figured the original severe "thunderstorm watch" might turn into a "thunderstorm warning," and we might have to deal with one. What we did not count on was it turning into a "tornado warning for Central Park"—a

tornado warning with the addition of several extremely severe thunderstorms with wind gusts of sixty to seventy knots.

As it turned out, this was the night, last July, that either an actual or near tornado touched down in Brooklyn during the last hour of our return trip. Its destructive power made

headlines for a few days due to the large areas of mature, historic trees, as well as power lines, that were simply cut down.

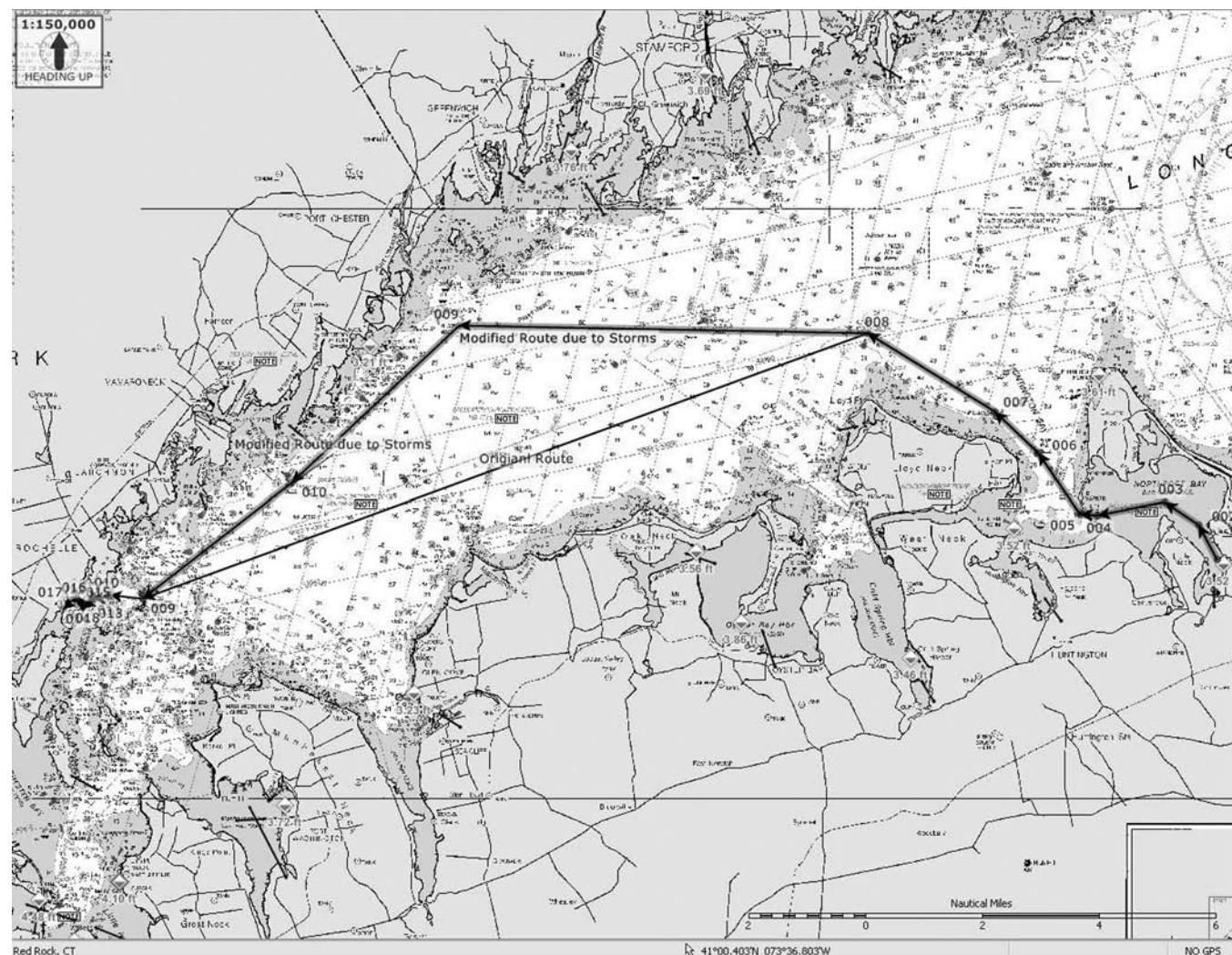
The last time I was near a tornado's path was a few years ago when one touched down on the Hudson just north of the Tappan Zee bridge and cut a swath of destruction through Sleepy Hollow, Pocantico Hills, and Hawthorne in Westchester County. I was training someone over in Cos Cob, Connecticut, well away from it. Over there, the entire sky turned a pale, foreboding yellow, and the wind swung nearly full circle in strong erratic gusts for an anxious, eerie fifteen minutes. The downed trees along the Saw Mill River Parkway on

the border of the Rockefeller Estate and the Town of Hawthorne were awe inspiring. A manned police car sitting at a gas station at the parkway exit directly in the path was picked up, spun around several times and slammed back down on the ground.

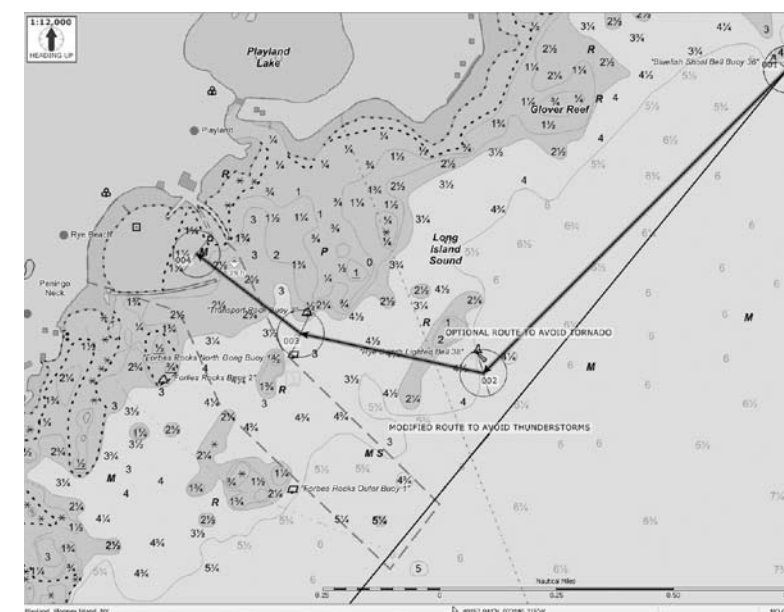
So, with these images in mind, we battened down the hatches, triple checked the waypoints in our route, turned up the gain on the RADAR and toggled the range between twenty-four and forty-eight miles to see the on-screen yellow patches of several large storms rapidly approaching from northwest to southeast, ten to fifteen miles ahead of us. Not that we needed the RADAR to actually see most of them.

The closer ones looked and sounded like they were right on top of us. As we closed to within less than a mile, it was like being in a war zone. Enormous bolts of lightning flashed and cracked all over the western horizon, illuminating monstrous storm clouds with each strike. I was prepared to deal with a severe thunderstorm, but I was not liking the tornado part.

After studying the patterns, I explained to Bob that we would attempt to weather route our-



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selves around each storm by taking a jog up to the Connecticut/Westchester Shoreline to try to miss them. We nipped the edge of one as we approached Great Captain's Island and briefly lost all visibility in the torrential downpour. The winds were severe, but the seas were not, due to the protection of the lee shoreline.

We could see a particularly massive storm on the RADAR screen moving across the Westchester and Bronx border directly toward our dock in Pelham Manor. That's the beauty of RADAR; you get a bird's eye view of the storms, complete with range and bearing as well as the outline of the shore.

RADAR/Chart Overlay is good too, but the pure RADAR is my preferred way to go under these conditions because the screen is less confusing minus the extraneous chart symbols. If I'm not worried about hitting any rocks or land features, I really do not need the chart on screen full time. It is also faster to toggle down to the low ranges to check for nearby vessel traffic from time to time. Those close-in targets are much clearer in pure RADAR, and so is the mini-ARPA collision avoidance software. I was explaining all this to my client, doing a pretty good job of keeping a calm controlled voice, and he was listening intently and doing an equally good job on the calm front himself.

We discussed some possible harbors of refuge to duck into should a storm take a turn right at us. I was considering some protected nooks in Great Captain's Harbor near Greenwich along with the Byram River in Port Chester, and I suddenly remembered a newly opened restaurant at Playland Amusement Park in Rye, which was only a mile to our north. The Pier Restaurant and Tiki Bar had recently installed some twenty or so sturdy, new moorings behind the formidable Playland Breakwater in order to attract some dock & dine business. It seemed like pretty good spot if we were about to be run down by a tornado. My client heartily agreed and, at my urging, proceeded to plot a quick course through the entrance channel on our Weems & Plath Chartplotter Board. We did the same for the MBM Marina fuel dock in Mamaroneck Harbor and the New Rochelle Municipal Marina fuel dock in Echo Bay. Any port in a storm.

Monitoring NOAA weather radio was quite dramatic to say the least as the positions, intended tracks, speeds of advance, and wind strengths of the fast moving storms were announced in that cold mechanical computer voice. This was especially true when the track of the potential tornado heading for Central Park was discussed. Bob got plenty of real-time, seat-of-the-pants, practice modifying our route on the fly for our safe pas-

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sage down the Westchester shoreline and the rock strewn entrance to Davenport Neck and Glen Island in New Rochelle.

As luck would have it, we missed the big storm that hit Pelham Manor by about ten minutes by slowing down off Rye to let it pass. And the tornado, if it officially qualified as one, touched down, as previously mentioned, in Brooklyn (while we were out there), about ten miles south of Central Park. And, ten miles northeast were we.

All was calm at the NYAC when we arrived. The dock crew, however, was still a little shaken by the destructive power unleashed by the storm that had hit the yacht club. And, if the truth be told, so were Bob and I, with plenty of adrenaline still pumping through our veins as we tied up the boat.

"Quick's the word and sharp's the action." See you next time from wherever the winds blow us.

The above comments are general suggestions. They are not intended to be used for navigational purposes. Individual captains are ultimately responsible for setting proper courses and safely navigating their vessels by relying on their own knowledge, judgment and experience to determine the correct action in any given situation

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