

The Perfect Storm – Bud Taplin

MISTRAL of Portsmouth, NH is our “star” of this show; ex KITKA, Westsail 32 #176, portraying the original SATORI, Westsail 32 #223. The boat is in a 95’ x 100’ x 20 deep tank inside of a massive sound stage on Warner Brothers back lot in Hollywood. The tank holds 1.2 million gallons of water and takes nine hours to fill or drain. The ceiling is about 80’ above the water, and the keel of the Westsail 32 is bolted to a hydraulically operated gimbal mechanism that can go up and down, pitch enough to put the bowsprit or boomkin underwater, and heel enough to put the masthead practically in the water. The pond is so big, that it requires going out in a dingy to get to the boat. There are two rolling drum wavemakers, four water cannons that can shoot spray halfway up the mast or cover the cabin top, three wind machines that can create an 80-knot gale, and a water dump machine that creates a wall of water that can completely engulf the boat. All this goes on while the gimbal operator makes the boat pitch, yaw, and roll. It’s hard to believe you are not actually in a massive storm at sea. Meanwhile, there are three cameras on cranes that have practically unlimited motion, three actors hanging on for dear life while trying to emote for the director, six divers in the water to handle emergencies, about 200 people operating all of the equipment, and one “sailing technical advisor”, ... me.

It is hard to believe that punishment the “star” receives on each take of each scene, and it is repeated at least 40 times each day, and this went on for three weeks with the sailboat portion of the movie. If the Westsail were not built so strongly, she would have been destroyed by this treatment. All of this to get a few minutes of scene stealing time in the upcoming film, “The Perfect Storm,” about an October 1991 hurricane off of the Grand Banks.

Part of the production moved over to another sound stage for the interior action aboard the boat. KITKA had to give up her interior, and they rebuilt it with about a 15-foot beam for better camera angles. It is inside a steel frame box cage that is mounted on two circular frames able to be rotated 360 degrees. They have water injection nozzles around the cage, as well as a method of getting light into the interior. As the boat does a rollover, water is injected, and the stunt doubles are tossed about the cabin along with loose gear, cushions, canned food, etc. After the fourth take of the rollover, I could hardly bear to watch it anymore. After you see this scene in the movie, you will either want to sell your boat, or be glad that you have a Westsail that can take this kind of punishment. Remember that there have been a number of Westsail 32’s that have experienced a

rollover and survived ... AISSA and PILOT to name two I know.

The exterior scenes of the crew on deck, being buffeted by the wind and waves, the helmsman hammered by the tiller, crew washed overboard, and being pulled back aboard, are truly realistic. This is what the director, Wolfgang Peterson; decided he absolutely wanted in making this movie. For this reason, he used real boats, not models, and went to the trouble and expense of this large tank and special built hydraulically operated gimbal mounts. The 55' fishing boat ANDREA GAIL was also put into the tank for its movie scenes.

During the rescue of the three crewmembers from the Westsail, a helicopter attempted to drop a cable with a basket down to the deck of the boat. With the wildly swinging mast, the cable tangled in the rigging, and the score was WESTSAIL 1, HELICOPTERS 0.

The studio used another sailboat mast with rigging, mounted on a gimballed frame, with a cable dangling from a crane for these scenes. They also had a helicopter on a pylon mounted to another gimballed frame. Remember, all the while, the water spray and wind machines were operating full blast. The camera crews were on their cranes in foul weather gear, and the cameras themselves covered with tarps except for the lens. The filming had to stop numerous times every day when the cameras were doused to the point that they had to be changed. It was hard to stay dry anywhere on the entire sound stage.

Of course, some of the scenes were filmed in the ocean outside of Dana Point Harbor in Southern California. For these, another Westsail 32, PEAR D, Hull #66 was chartered, and I had the opportunity to be aboard while the helicopter with its cameras shot scenes of the boat first leaving the harbor on the voyage. They did make me stay below though.

Not to worry, the fishing boat sinks in the movie, but the Westsail survives.