

# Salt Water Summit

*[This sea story was first published in 1999 in the Naval Academy's alumni magazine, **Shipmate**.]*

The President of the United States personally demoted me four pay grades in one day.

President George Bush (41) is visiting your ship. Not only that, Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union, is meeting him on board as the Cold War draws to a close. The meeting will take place in a small harbor on the island of Malta, a Mediterranean island no U.S. Navy ship has visited for years. This is the stuff from which your grandchildren's sea stories are born. In this case, the story includes storm force winds, high seas, dangerous boat rides, marginal anchorages, and cancelled state dinners.

The 1989 Malta "Salt Water Summit" is now noted as marking the end of the Cold War. The world watched the event through the magic of CNN. On the SIXTH FLEET flagship, BELKNAP (CG-26), we had a closer and more personal view. I was more up-close-and-personal than I hoped or desired. Navy Meteorology-Oceanography specialists are the service's weather forecasters, and traditionally get the "blame" for bad weather, especially at sea, where the single METOC officer is well known to the staff and wardroom. As the SIXTH FLEET Oceanographer, I was the on-scene weather forecaster for the Bush-Gorbachev meetings.

December weather in the Med can sometimes be treacherous, and forecasting is tough and tricky. When the rumors first reached us that Bush and Gorbachev were planning to meet aboard U.S. and Soviet warships in December, I couldn't believe it. There is an historical precedent of world leaders holding meetings at sea, but winter in the Mediterranean seemed to be taking more risk than necessary. As more details of the plans reached us, and we learned the ships were to be anchored in a protected harbor on Malta, I felt a lot better. Even though the island is the crossroads of the Med, located as it is on the western edge of the Ionian (Central Mediterranean) basin, it normally avoids most of the destructive winter weather.

The SIXTH FLEET Surface Operations Officer, CDR Bill Bonnet, was assigned as the primary Navy action officer. I talked to him soon after he returned from the first planning meeting. Bill's first question was, "What's a gregale?" He followed with, "How often do they have them?" I looked up gregale among the multitude of local wind names in the Mediterranean Forecaster's Handbook and explained that it was a winter season easterly wind that drove heavy seas onto the eastern shore of Malta—across the long fetch of the Ionian.

My climatology pub agreed with the information Bill had gotten from the Maltese. Typically, gale force (33-47 knots) gregales occur less than 5% of the time in December. Storm force winds are much less likely. I estimated that a storm force gregale would only occur about once every ten Decembers.

I was optimistic about our chances of favorable weather. Little did I know how misleading the averages were in this case!

BELKNAP left our homeport of Gaeta, Italy on the day after Thanksgiving of 1989. The White House wanted us in Malta early. As Fleet flagships go, the “fighting flagship” was tiny. By making the rebuilt cruiser into a flagship the Navy had stretched BELKNAP’s space and service capacity as far as it could. White House staff, White House communications folks, and Secret Service agents needed a significant amount of space on the already overcrowded ship.

Nearly half the staff was forced to stay home in Gaeta. AGC Bill Randall and a petty officer normally manned the bare-bones weather office on BELKNAP. Neither the weather office personnel nor I made the first cut “short-list” of those privileged staff members to go. But subsequently the White House listed weather forecasting as a Navy task.

To avoid confusion (and to know who to blame) it’s important that a single forecast office have ultimate responsibility for any operational forecast. During my time in the Navy, we tried to move that role as far forward as we could (with the customer, if possible). That’s how I became the Saltwater Summit weatherman. I was able to take my E-5 aerographers mate. Chief Randall had already planned a Stateside leave for the period. He volunteered to cancel, but I knew only one of us could go anyway.

Before Malta, I had never been able spend as much time as I would have liked in the weather office. The rest of my staff duties forced my Oceanography specialist interests to the back burner. I soon got a chance to put my meteorology education to work.

In 1989 the sea-going weather forecaster in the Med had several sources of data. Satellite pictures from METEOSAT (the European geostationary weather satellite) were very useful. Computer products from the Fleet Numerical Oceanography Center in Monterey were forwarded by high-frequency facsimile broadcast from the Naval Oceanography Command Center in Rota, Spain. The HF broadcast also included Rota’s locally prepared forecasts and European computer forecasts. Teletype broadcasts and the Navy message system brought in alphanumeric products, like observations from local stations.

After a quick refresher on tuning HF radios and the satellite receiver, I was ready to take my forecast show to sea. The morning we left Italy I told Nancy the same thing I told Chief Randall when he departed on leave, “As long as you don’t hear about the weather on the news, I’ll be happy.”

The Joint Staff tasked me to make a daily forecast that would be part of the Public Affairs Office (PAO) information associated with the summit. We called it the “Willard Scott forecast.” To get it out by 5:00 am on the East Coast, I started my daily routine during our stay in Malta at 3:00 am local.

The Maltese decision to host the summit broke a long stretch in which no U.S. (or Soviet) Navy ships had called in Malta. Aware of their strategic location, the Maltese government had been strictly neutral in the Cold War. They resisted any port call overtures from either superpower.

Marsaxlokk Harbor is located on the east coast of the main island, a few kilometers south of the capital of Valetta. Its name translates as “Pretty Bay” and is quite appropriate. The press wanted to take advantage of the picturesque surroundings. Media interests and spin-doctors took precedence over cautious seamanship in positioning BELKNAP and the Black Sea Fleet cruiser SLAVA. We anchored in column facing the harbor entrance, BELKNAP astern of SLAVA. Kedge anchors astern were supposed to prevent swinging at the anchor and keep our heading and relative position constant.



*Before the gregale – Marsaxlokk Harbor*

Marsaxlokk Harbor is small for two cruisers. To give CNN and the rest of the world’s media the best television pictures, we anchored very close together. Our swing circle overlapped SLAVA’s and was much too close to shoal water for comfort. Captain (later RADM) John Sigler, the flagship commanding officer, and his wardroom and crew had to call on their sharpest ship handling and seamanship skills.

The Bush-Gorbachev meetings were scheduled for Saturday and Sunday. Early in the preceding week the weather was perfect as a strong high-pressure center was established over Europe. Experienced Mediterranean forecasters are wary of high pressure, though. The strongest winds and highest seas in the Med do not come with the passing cyclones and cold fronts (although they can be ferocious for short periods). The real problems often come after the front passes, when the high builds in, tightening the pressure gradient over a long fetch. That’s the cause of the

Mistral in the West Med and the Bora in the Adriatic, as well as Malta's Gregale.

The December 1989 gregale was caused by the strong pressure gradient between a massive high-pressure center over Czechoslovakia and lower pressure in the East Med and North Africa. By Wednesday, the forecast didn't look good for the Summit weekend. An upper level short wave was forecast to intensify and dive straight south late in the week. I knew it would intensify the low developing over Tunisia and would further tighten the gradient and increase the winds over Malta. I gave VADM Williams a heads-up, but there was obviously nothing we could do at that point. He joked that my forecast for 40 knots on Saturday was "probably off by 15 knots, anyway." Little did we know that he was right. Unfortunately, I was 15 knots too low!

During the days before the meetings between Bush and Gorbachev, the officers and men of the two flagships got to know each other through a series of exchange visits. While touring the SLAVA, VADM Williams asked the Soviet admiral (VADM Selimanov) what his "weather-guesser" was predicting. The translator told me later he had a small problem getting them to understand *weather-guesser*. They eventually decided on "synoptic magician." The Soviets didn't have an at-sea forecaster. They got their forecasts from Moscow and Sevastopol. At that point in the week, their information essentially agreed with mine.



*Soviet and USN sailors*

The Bush party arrived on Friday. Secretary of State James Baker, White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft accompanied the president. The entire BELKNAP crew and SIXTH FLEET staff manned the rails under cloudy skies with 15-knot winds for the arrival. My forecast for the next day continued to be pessimistic. I looked for deteriorating weather and increasing winds into the early afternoon.

Governor Sununu called a meeting for early Saturday. CAPT Sigler asked me to be ready to update the forecast.

Because of the tenuous nature of the anchorage, CAPT Sigler augmented the anchor watch with conning officer-qualified chief petty officers. Before I hit the rack on Friday, I briefed the bridge that I expected the winds to begin to increase during the night. I asked them to call me if they exceeded 25 knots.

We were still in fairly light winds when I stopped by the wardroom about 0300. I took my coffee topside and climbed to the bridge. As I walked up the port side I felt the wind begin to freshen. As I entered the bridge, the anchor watch OOD said, "It's been 17 knots or less all night." I responded, "Check it right now, Chief." We watched the anemometer needle climb past 20, 25, then 30 knots. I called CAPT Sigler while the chief got the Sea and Anchor detail set. Even before the captain arrived on the bridge, BELKNAP dragged the stern anchor as we swung to port into the northeast winds. SLAVA dragged her anchor at the same time. CAPT Sigler and I began what would turn out to be a 36-hour watch.

The bridge, deck, and engineering watches were well prepared for the winds. CAPT Sigler immediately began steaming to the anchor to reduce the strain and prevent dragging the bow anchor. I wore a path from the anemometer on the bridge to the small weather office behind CIC. I tuned in and copied the satellite picture every half hour. The pictures combined with the ship's pressure and wind observations told me the Tunisian low was intensifying even faster than I had expected. The winds continued to increase to the 35-knot range. Fetch limits kept the seas down to a confused 3-4 feet.

At 0700 Governor Sununu held a meeting of key White House staff, along with CAPT Sigler and me. My forecast was for further increasing winds and seas until mid-afternoon. At this point, Governor Sununu addressed me as Lieutenant instead of Lieutenant Commander (a Freudian slip?). He caught the mistake right away, but joked that if the weather didn't improve he would ask the president to demote me. During the discussions of what we could or should do about the meetings, the governor showed the Wisdom of Solomon. "Well, today's the Soviets' meeting day. It's going to be a mess whatever we do. We'll let them decide."



*Bush party departs for first meeting*

Rather than rendezvous on SLAVA, the Saturday morning meeting was held on the cruise ship SS MAXIM GORKIY that the Soviets had brought to Malta for administrative support. It was tied up pier-side, so president Gorbachev never had to go to sea at all. The small boat transfer of the Bush party was difficult, but good seamanship prevailed. Their return in early afternoon was truly perilous. After multiple passes, the Admiral's barge crew brought the boat alongside long enough to get the dignitaries back on BELKNAP—wet but safe. CAPT Sigler later awarded the boat crew with Navy Achievement medals recognizing their outstanding skill.

In the mean time, the winds had continued to strengthen and I had continued walking my laps between the bridge and the weather satellite weather receiver. It became obvious to me that a whole series of Tunisian low-pressure centers were continuing to form and strengthen. I changed my forecast to reflect winds diminishing after 8:00 pm.

As the weather deteriorated, the afternoon meeting and the evening state dinner were canceled. Periodically, I was demoted for failure to improve the weather. I went from CDR (Select) to Midshipman by mid-afternoon. This case is the clearest I saw in my career of Murphy's Law of Meteorology. Simply stated, "***A perfect forecast of bad weather is still wrong.***" In Malta, they swear that the Saltwater Summit gregale was the worst weather in living memory.



*My good friend Tim McGee was the SIXTH FLEET Oceanographer a few years after we were there. BELKNAP returned to Malta during his tour. He saw Edwin Galea's painting "Malta Summit" in a shop and bought it for me. The artist's note reads, "For Captain Warrenfeltz : Guru of the Gregale"*

Shortly after the president's party returned to BELKNAP, we received a call on the bridge-to-bridge radio from VADM Selimanov. Knowing that we had an on-scene meteorologist, he wanted my opinion of conditions for the rest of the weekend. Maltese, Soviet, and U.S. forecasters called for continuing storm force winds (>48 knots) through Sunday morning. I was fairly certain we would see the worst by Saturday evening. I stuck by my forecast for winds diminishing after 8:00 pm. Through the rest of the day I added SLAVA to my periodic updates.

President Bush enjoyed himself. He spent several hours on the bridge with governor Sununu, Secretary Baker, and General Scowcroft. My classmate John Stufflebeem was the president's Naval Aide. Back in 1976, when we were both Surface Warfare Officers, John and I had steamed to the anchor during a storm in the Naples harbor. We shared out memories of that storm with President Bush. CAPT Sigler commented, "Mr. President, you know it's getting bad when the commanders start telling *you* sea stories!"

CAPT Sigler decided that it would not be safe to keep the accommodation ladder rigged. He asked the president's permission to raise it, explaining that it would add about 30 minutes to preparations for boat

operations after the seas finally permitted. Now the White House folks were physically isolated from the outside world. One of the advisors joked that they should offer the media a 15-minute one-on-one if they could get there in an hour. The president got a good laugh out of that idea, but said, "No, they'd be out here parachuting with scuba gear. Somebody'd get hurt."

Mr. Bush was wonderful to BELKNAP's sailors throughout his visit. He moved around the ship freely. On a number of occasions he took cameras from crewmembers, handed them to one of the White House people, then posed with the sailor. He was cheerful and comfortable with the crew and enjoyed his time aboard despite the rough weather. Some of the other White House folks didn't fare so well. By early evening the winds were greater than 50 knots and the ship was taking rolls up to 15 degrees at anchor. Sick Bay went through their entire supply of motion sickness patches! The worldwide media began calling the meeting the "Seasick Summit."

Near the peak of the storm, with 50-knot winds, the ship rolling, and a steady rain blowing horizontally down the deck, the anchor watch reported, "Anchor tends 11 o'clock, heavy strain, and the President's on the foc's'l." The Junior Officer of the Deck incredulously asked him to "Say Again?" A well-trained seaman, he repeated word-for-word, "Anchor tends 11 o'clock ..." The JOOD cut him off, "Not that part." Anchor watch: "Oh, the president's up here on the foc's'l."

As 8:00 pm approached I anxiously awaited the first hint that the conditions were soon to improve. At exactly 7:55 Secretary Baker was leaning on the forward bulkhead of the bridge when he said, "Hey, I see some stars!" Finally, I was able to use the weatherman's favorite phrase, "As forecast, sir." As the winds finally slackened to 35 knots, I got a presidential pardon and resumed my O-4 rank.

Gale force winds continued through Saturday night, but Sunday was much brighter. The seas were rough as the 25-30 knot winds became more variable in direction. On BELKNAP, we hoped Gorbachev would come aboard for the scheduled Sunday meeting. It was not to be. The rough seas provided a good enough reason for the Soviets to stay ashore. After President Bush attended the chaplain's services on the mess decks, he and his party returned to MAXIM GORKIY to conclude the Summit talks.

VADM Selimanov included a much-appreciated thank you in his farewell message to VADM Williams. "Thank you for the accurate weather forecast messages and information received, which helped us maneuver and navigate our ship in a safe manner during very dangerous conditions."

Thunderstorms during the helicopter departure in the afternoon provided a fitting ending to a meeting where the weather talk overshadowed the politics. I got to keep my LCDR rank, but President Bush got the last word. At the conclusion of the chapel service and just before he left BELKNAP for the last time he thanked the staff and the crew. "Admiral Williams, everyone's been super. They all did a great job—except for that Oceanographer!"