

Sneaky Cyril Smacks Neiafu

February 24, 2012 – Vava'u, Tonga



The Boston-based Pacific Seacraft 40 *Shango* rides Cyril's fury in Neiafu Harbor. © 2012 Gary Kegel

Although this news is several weeks old due to interrupted Internet access at the scene, we thought this report and dramatic photos warranted sharing. Cruisers Dave and Sherry McCampbell of the Marathon, FL-based CSY 44 Soggy Pawswere in Vava'u when a surprise cyclone hit earlier this month.

Superbowl Sunday (Monday, February 6, here in Tonga) was a blustery rainy day in Neiafu harbor, Vava'u, Tonga. During the game, which we watched on Aquarium Cafe's big screen TV, we observed strong gusts from the northwest rocket across the harbor and set boats bouncing. The forecast from all sources, Tonga, Fiji, and the U.S.-generated GFS (via GRIB files), was for more of the same with winds to 30 knots overnight, and then by morning, less than 20 knots and clearing. We had been experiencing these same squally conditions now for over a week, as the South Pacific Convergence Zone (SPCZ) was streaming over us all the way from the Solomons.

After the game, and while it was still light, we headed back to our boats on moorings about 5 miles south of Neiafu harbor. About 6 a.m., we were awakened by a nasty squall. We had no internet, so took a quick look at the latest Spot forecast (taken from a GRIB file). It indicated nothing significant in our area. But it was then gusting to about 45 knots from the NNE. We knew something was up.

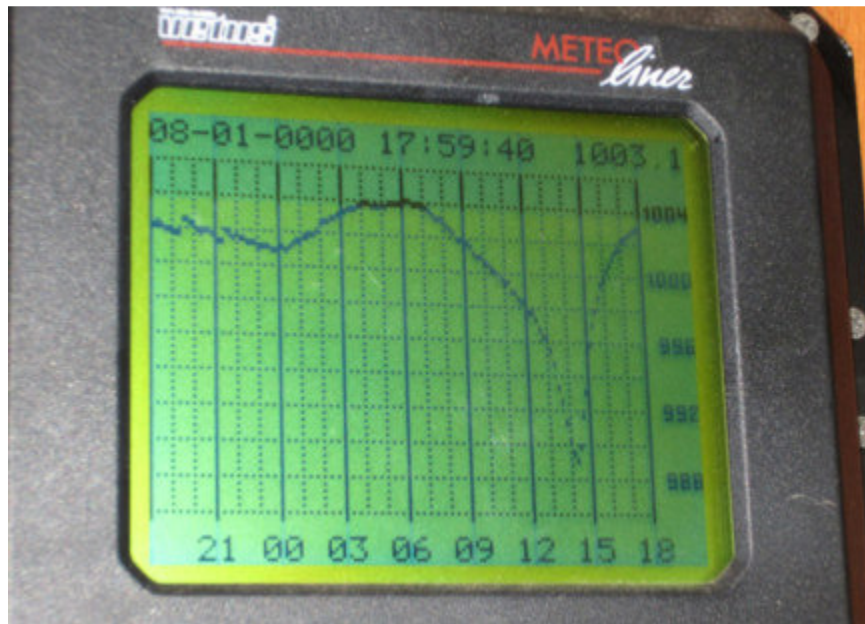


Earlier, squally conditions during the big game made cruisers wonder if something bigger was coming. Seen here are two Moorings bareboats riding a 35-knot squall.

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About that time a local ex-pat came up on the VHF with a special weather bulletin from the Tonga weather service indicating that Cyclone *Cyril* was close by, headed southeast, and would pass nearly over us to the southwest in the next couple of hours. *Cyril*, unforecast, had spun up overnight between Fiji and Tonga. We tracked its progress by watching the barometer and watching the wind back from NNE to eventually SW. We were reasonably well prepared on our "cyclone mooring" with everything battened down, except that the dinghy and small motor were still on the davits.

During the next two hours the wind went to 67 knots, a Category 3 cyclone in the South Pacific. We had seas to five feet and wind from the west, our longest fetch direction. Fortunately, it went by us rapidly, and by 10 a.m., it had calmed to about 20 knots. Within a couple of days it had disappeared into the southern ocean.



"Um, honey, does this look normal to you?" When your barometer plunges like this, you know trouble will soon come a'knockin'.

Photo Courtesy Shango

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During the height of the storm, our mooring dragged, and before we could get free, we ended up on the bow of another boat. Both of us sustained considerable damage, but no one was hurt and we are working on repairing both boats without too much expense.

In Neiafu harbor, where about 20 sailboats are moored, most of the docks along the eastern shore were damaged and rendered unusable. Several moorings moved and at least three boats ended up against the shoreline. One trimaran lost the front of an ama and a monohull sustained hull damage, but was not holed. Electricity and Internet service were out in some parts of the island group for a week. We understand there was also considerable damage in Tongatapu, the southern island group and capitol of Tonga.

The speed with which Cyclone *Cyril* developed (less than 12 hours), the timing (middle of the night), and the existing squally conditions combined to make this a difficult situation. Even the 'old hands' in Neiafu were surprised by this one. We think that the combination of the SPCZ and a Madden Julian Oscillation peak contributed to create this surprise cyclone — a far cry from the many days notice of an approaching hurricane that we are used to in the Caribbean.

- dave & sherry mccampbell