SIGNALLING THE APPROACH OF A TYPHOON AT HONG KONG.

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This article was written nearly thirty years ago, and the method of conveying warnings of typhoons may have been changed since those days.

Like most things, typhoons have a season, and their periods of activity, as far as Hong Kong is concerned, are summarized in this piece of doggerel:

June, too soon;
July, stand by;
August, you must;
September, remember;
October, all over.

"A depression is reported east of Luzon, moving in a N.W. direction." These words appear at intervals in the local papers during the hot season at Hong Kong. They mean nothing to the newcomer, but the old resident knows that this innocent looking paragraph is the first warning of a typhoon that may cause fearful destruction, and he watches the papers carefully for news of its progress. Nobody, however, says much at this early stage.

Next day the depression is reported to be still moving north-west, and people now say to each other that another typhoon is crossing from the Philippines. Presently the atmosphere gets oppressively hot and sultry, the breeze dies away, and it is obvious that the disturbance is coming closer. The sky then rapidly becomes overcast, rain falls, and a red south cone is hoisted on the harbour signal flagstaffs. This is the first official warning, and it means that a typhoon exists to the south of the Colony, but at present is more than 300 miles away. The fact that "the red cone is up" now becomes a universal topic of conversation, and everybody asks will the hurricane really come this time, or will it go off elsewhere as so many do?

The junks and sampans (small boats) in the harbour now show great vigilance, and the more cautious ones retire at once to the shelter provided for them by a special breakwater. Under their own sails and oars they go down the harbour in a regular procession, and the passage of this mosquito fleet is quite a pretty sight.

The signs of bad weather soon become more marked, the hills are hidden in fog, the clouds grow darker, and the wind freshens. All eyes are on the signals, and when the red cone is displaced by a black one—showing that
the typhoon is now less than 300 miles away—preparations to meet it begin in earnest. Every junk and sampan that has not yet moved, seeks refuge; many of the large ones go over to the north side of the harbour and anchor in the bays there, while the smaller all make for the shelter within the breakwater until the enclosed piece of water there becomes a closely packed mass of boats. Many still make their own way down—creeping along the shore—but, as time is now precious and the wind and sea are rising, most of them engage the services of steam launches to take them along. This is a most curious and interesting sight, for each launch takes as many boats as it possibly can, all so closely fastened together that often the launch itself is lost to sight in the crowd, and it looks as if an immense raft were moving along. So large is the raft that the launch can barely move, and

![Hong Kong Typhoon Signals](/militaryhealth.bmj.com/)

the whole affair proceeds down the harbour at such a snail's pace that one feels inclined to back the typhoon to arrive first. A second launch often has to assist, and it also gets lost quickly in the mass of small craft. Several of these “rafts,” in all stages of growth, move in one direction, while disengaged launches steam back eagerly for fresh engagements. When the boat people think that the raft is large enough—and that is only when it can just keep moving—they resent fresh additions, and any sampans trying to join on are driven off by boathooks and missiles. These newcomers persist in their efforts and return the fire, so that a certain liveliness is sometimes evident at the circumference of the mass.

Eventually all the small craft reach shelter, or, if they delay too long, are capsized, so that of the hundreds of boats that usually dot the harbour not one is to be seen; they are all either packed tight behind the break-
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water, or lying in little fleets in the more precarious refuge of the bays of the north side. The ferry-boats and other launches are still at work, but as time goes on, matters get too bad for them, and when eventually the typhoon gun is fired—the signal that the cyclone is on the point of arriving—saure qui peut is the word, and they in turn vanish from the face of the waters.

The large craft are now in sole possession of the harbour, and they have not been idle all this time. The few sailing ships strike their topmasts, put out extra anchors and hope for the best. Some of the steamers run for the bays, but most of them prepare to ride it out where they are. Awnings are taken in, boats lashed down, topmasts lowered, and steam got up. It is very striking to see vessel after vessel giving out smoke in preparation for the struggle—it is like serving out ammunition before going into action. The men-of-war disdain to seek shelter, but they get up steam, have extra anchors handy, and make all other necessary preparations. The deep-sea ships are now ready—they have not fled like the small craft, but purpose fighting the typhoon hand to hand.

All this time the wind has been fast increasing in force, moaning and shrieking, and great gusts swoop down with torrents of drenching rain; the clouds get blacker and blacker and move ever faster, the sea foams and heaves, the waves rise as high as the wind will let them, and it is evident that the Colony is in the grip of the dreaded typhoon. Between the blinding squalls of rain the big ships can be seen plunging and straining at their anchors. They are all “stripped,” but the storm is now blowing fiercely, the wind is whistling and howling like a living thing, the sea is running high, and the ships writhe and plunge and jerk at their cables so furiously that it looks as if something must give. Although the engines are going full speed ahead, several of them drag their anchors, while one or two evidently think that they are out-matched by the elements, and take advantage of the last few gleams of daylight to run into one of the more sheltered bays. This is no easy task, because for several days ships have been constantly coming into harbour and none going out, so that it needs skill and seamanship to avoid collision in a hurricane like this. But they slowly stagger along, rolling and pitching and picking their way till they cast anchor in greater security.

There is usually no lightning or thunder, but the booming of the wind and the crash of the seas make quite noise enough. For several hours the storm rages, though when plenty of warning has been given as a rule no great damage is done at sea, but in November, 1900, a most disastrous typhoon passed over the Colony. It was not the proper season for these visitations, so the warnings were rather disregarded, and many boats neglected to shelter in time. The centre of the typhoon passed over Hong Kong, so that the wind completely changed its direction and all the small craft that had run to the bays suddenly found themselves on a lee shore. The destruction that ensued was terrible—junks and sampans
went down in scores or were dashed to pieces, and for miles the shore was strewn with wreckage. Many large junks that sank became dangers to navigation, and had to be removed afterwards. Steam launches shared in the general disaster, and even H.M.S. "Sandpiper"—a vessel of shallow draught built for river work—went to the bottom. She fired the only minute guns of distress that I have ever heard—strange sounds in a harbour!—and they brought the destroyer "Otter" to her aid. In the height of the hurricane this vessel forged her way right across, and by masterly seamanship succeeded in rescuing all the crew save one, who was crushed. The bows of the gallant "Otter" were crumpled up, and the risk of her sinking in the wreck-strewn water was very great. Another daring deed was the rescue of the crew of the capsized dredger by blue-jackets of the "Tamar," who took their lives in their hands in an open rowing boat. This dredger was a large vessel, newly arrived, and the operation of righting her was one of the feats of Sir Percy Scott, of H.M.S. "Terrible," in China.

The people who live on shore must also make their preparations for meeting the emergency. Shutters are closed and securely bolted, the typhoon bars are placed over the windows, and all doors are carefully fastened. A supply of food is laid in by cautious folk, and artificial light is everywhere made use of. All traffic stops, and the wind runs riot like a conqueror through the empty streets of the captured city. Every here and there a house collapses with loss of life, roofs and tiles are lifted off, windows blown in, and in bad cases the inhabitants have to take shelter in the cellars. Trees are blown down or stripped of their leaves, telephone wires fall across the streets, and sometimes even the thick iron posts that support them are bent by the wind.

Gradually the barometer, which has fallen rapidly, begins to rise again—in November, 1900, the barograph recorded a long and sharp "V"—the gusts become lighter and less frequent, and in a few hours the wind has gone, and things gradually resume their usual condition. The mosquito fleet sallies out from shelter, and the interrupted business of the Colony once more gets into full swing.