

THE WOMAN WHO WALKED ON WATER

As the 1997 hurricane season wound down, one final storm crossed into the Mosquito Coast region of Honduras in early November. As MITCH meandered through the western Caribbean, this large but slow moving storm did not seem to pose a serious threat, at least in the eyes of most Central American weather forecasters. As a result, few storm preparations were made in Honduras, but a few incidents raised serious concerns about the true severity of the storm. One such incident was the loss of the cruise ship *Fantome*, (which had only crew on board) went down with all hands while trying to seek shelter off the northeast coast of Honduras by remaining in the lee of Roatan Island.. (1)

As the now massive storm crossed the Honduran coast, it reached Category 5 status, and soon became the most destructive hurricane in Western Hemisphere history, with 18,207 people dead or missing. Many of the places that we regularly visited in the course of our medical mission work suffered terribly. The city of San Pedro Sula, second largest in Honduras, handled over 30,000 refugees from the storm, and the new airport terminal there, where we routinely arrived and departed , was flooded and filled with mud and debris up to the second floor level. The nearby town of La Lima, where United Fruit maintains its headquarters, was totally buried in flood water, with thousands of homes destroyed. The city of La Ceiba received over two feet of rain in less than one day, and the city center became an island, with all bridges destroyed. In the city of Progresso, near San Pedro Sula, thousands of residents spent several days on the roof tops of their homes or nearby buildings. In the nation's capital city of Tegucigalpa, over five feet of rain fell in less than five days, and over 50 major bridges were destroyed. Several factories, hospitals, and even whole neighborhoods were swept away. The Honduran government estimated that in the capital city alone, more than one million persons were homeless, and nearly 100,000 houses were totally destroyed.

In the aftermath of Hurricane "MITCH ", our access to the village of Quince de Enero was cut off by damage to the approaches to a new bridge across the Chamelecon River. A day or so later, the villagers were astonished when a US Navy Sea-Bee unit , commanded by a female LCDR, helo'd into the village, asked the mayor what their greatest need was, and then quickly set

about to repair the bridge approaches. Before the bridge was repaired, our mission team had to use an alternate route to the village, which took twice the time, and was many times more dangerous, with narrow dirt roads, many dangerous switchbacks, and steep sided drop-offs. During one such transit of our mission team across the mountain route, one nurse's assistant lay on the floor of the van, terror stricken and weeping.

During the years that the nation now known as Belize was British Honduras, the Royal Navy based its "Caribbean Squadron" at Belize, but by the time that nation had become independent, the squadron had shrunk to a single ship. During rescue operations after the storm, the Royal Navy frigate HMS Sheffield was vectored to a location where a possible survivor had been spotted from the air. On arrival in the reported vicinity, the frigate launched a helicopter, and asked the pilot for a report. The pilot replied that he was seeing what appeared to be a woman walking on the water, and she was waving frantically. U.S. Marine Sergeant Zach Miller, who was assigned to Sheffield as an interpreter, reported "That's the mental image I have, of her standing on top of the water, almost like Jesus walking on the water". What Sergeant Miller found, however, was that the woman, school teacher Isabella Arriola, had been floating on a piece of metal roofing that had sunk below the surface when she stood up to be rescued. After reaching Sheffield, and in discussion with Sergeant Miller, she told of having been swept out of her home with her husband and her three children six days earlier by rapidly rising storm waters from Hurricane MITCH. At the time, she was within the eye of the hurricane, and eventually, her youngest son, age seven, was torn from her arms, and she found herself swimming alone several miles at sea in waters later found to be over 4000 feet deep. At the time of her rescue, Isabella had drifted over 60 miles from her home village.

Aboard Sheffield, Isabella Arriola quickly became a patron saint of a Honduras whose death toll from MITCH was rapidly climbing past 10,000. According to the ship's commanding officer, the entire ship became energized to search for and rescue other survivors. "It's something I shall never forget", said the Captain. "She touched everybody, really. Her strength of character – resilience does not describe it."

During her conversation with Sergeant Miller, Isabella once asked for a Bible, and the ship produced a version in English. With Sergeant Miller translating and Arriola following the words with a finger, they once recited

together a favorite psalm, “which was kinda difficult to do”, Miller said later.

During her press interview from a hospital bed in Trujillo, Honduras, Isabella Arriola later said “Only God saved me.” Although Isabella Arriola had not actually walked on water, we have no doubt that she regularly walked and talked with God, and also with her Lord Jesus.

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(1) “Hurricane MITCH and the loss of the *Fantome*” by Jim Carrier.