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National Weather Service

Central Pacific Hurricane Center

AUGUST 2-22, 1972 (HURRICANE CELESTE)

A tropical disturbance about 450 nautical miles south of LaPaz, Mexico on the 2nd moved westward and stalled near 15N 120W on the 4th. It developed gradually into a tropical storm by the 6th near where it had stalled and then moved slowly westward. There were no ship reports nearby when the vessel WGBC about 90 nautical miles south of the center indicated westerly winds of 20 knots and a pressure of 1006.4 mb (29.72"). Ships then remained well clear of the storm, now named CELESTE, until 08/1800Z when the SANTA ISABEL MARU passed 150 nautical miles southeast of the center.

A radio telephone call from the STAR TRACK estimated 80-90 knot winds near 16N 123W at 09/0054Z. During the rapid development to hurricane intensity a 117-foot, three-masted, square-rigged sailing vessel, the REGINA MARIS, with 53 persons aboard, became involved in the storm and was damaged by high winds and rough seas. It began taking on 2,000 gallons of water an hour and issued a distress call. A U.S. Air Force reconnaissance aircraft on a mission to the hurricane was alerted to the distressed vessel. That aircraft found it some distance from its estimated position, guided a rescue aircraft to the ship, and then continued on its mission. The VISHEA TRUTH reached the sailing vessel and took it in tow until the USCGC MELLON took over late on the 13th. Rescue and towing operations were complicated by the after effects of CELESTE and the effects of Hurricane DIANA, which followed 1000 nautical miles and 4 days after CELESTE.

Hurricane CELESTE crossed 140W at 14N about 12/0900Z. For the next 2 days it moved west-southwestward about 10 knots. The storm passed south of the Hawaiian Islands on the 15th. The closest point of approach, at 16/0600Z, was 380 nautical miles south-southwest of South Point on the island of Hawaii. Fifteen foot surf pounded the Puna, Kau, and South Kona coasts of the Big Island.

By this time CELESTE had gradually turned to a west-northwesterly course and was headed directly for Johnston Island-a small, low-lying atoll, with an area of about one square mile and highest elevation of less than 20 feet above sea level. Extended (72-hour) forecasts provided ample opportunity for precautionary measures to be taken at Johnston. Later, the forecast for CELESTE to pass close to Johnston caused the Air Force to evacuate the entire population of about 500 military and civilian personnel the day before the hurricane struck, as a precaution against the possible escape of stored toxic gases.

On the morning of the 19th northerly hurricane-force winds raked Johnston for several hours as CELESTE's center passed about 25 nautical miles to the northeast. Details on the type, extent and dollar value of damage to the military facilities are not available, although the north and northwest sides of the structures appeared to have been sandblasted by blown sand and coral. Intensive preparation for the storm and the center passing north of the island no doubt caused damage to be relatively light. Fears that waves might inundate the atoll did not materialize, partly because of the protection afforded by extensive reefs and large deposits of dredging spoil which lie offshore to the north and northeast of the island.

The Johnston weather station lost about a third of its roof and ceiling tiles, but interiors and equipment were virtually unscathed. Weather instruments that remained in operation throughout the storm recorded the following:

1. A fastest mile of 105 miles an hour (statute) from the northwest at 7:59 a.m. on the 19th - the greatest in 13 years of record and much above the previous maximum of 49 miles an hour observed in November 1959 and again in March 1964. The gust recorder was inoperative.
2. Gale force winds, from 11:18 p.m. on the 18th to 11:47 a.m. on the 19th.
3. Hurricane-force winds from 3:54 a.m. to 9:18 a.m. on the 19th.
4. A minimum sea-level pressure of 29.04 inches (983.4 mb) at 11:58 a.m. on the 19th. This compares with the previous minimum of 29.58 inches (1001.7 mb).
5. A total rainfall of 6.21 inches was measured in the catch basin of the tipping bucket weighing gage. However, this may be an underestimate, since the funnel of the gage was partially plugged with coral.

Immediately after passing north of Johnston, CELESTE took a sharp turn to a due northward course and began to weaken. Nevertheless, at 21/0600Z the AMERICAN LANCER only about 20 nautical miles north of the center was pounded by 55-knot gales, heavy rain which reduced the visibility to 1/2 mile and seas of 10 feet.

CELESTE was downgraded to a tropical storm by 22/1200Z near 21N 172W and rapidly dissipated thereafter due to unidirectional vertical wind shear.

1972: Hurricane Celeste					
Date/Time (UTC)	Latitude (N)	Longitude (W)	Pressure (mb)	Wind Speed (kt)	Stage/Notes
08/12/0600	15.0	139.3		85	Hurricane Cat. 2
08/12/1200	14.0	140.2		95	"
08/12/1800	13.7	141.8		85	"
08/13/0000	13.4	142.9		80	Hurricane Cat. 1
08/13/0600	13.0	144.2		80	"
08/13/1200	12.7	145.7		90	Hurricane Cat. 2

08/13/1800	12.6	147.0		90	"
08/14/0000	12.6	148.0	967	95	"
08/14/0600	12.5	149.6		100	Hurricane Cat. 3
08/14/1200	12.5	151.0		100	"
08/14/1800	12.4	151.7		100	"
08/15/0000	12.5	152.6		100	"
08/15/0600	12.5	153.9		100	"
08/15/1200	12.8	154.6		100	"
08/15/1800	12.9	155.8		90	Hurricane Cat. 2
08/16/0000	13.4	156.7		90	"
08/16/0600	13.7	158.0		90	"
08/16/1200	14.0	159.0		85	"
08/16/1800	14.3	159.8		75	Hurricane Cat. 1
08/17/0000	14.5	160.4		70	"
08/17/0600	14.7	161.2		70	"
08/17/1200	15.0	162.0		75	"
08/17/1800	15.0	162.9		80	"
08/18/0000	15.1	163.6	952	85	Hurricane Cat. 2
08/18/0600	15.3	164.5		85	"
08/18/1200	15.4	165.3		90	"
08/18/1800	15.5	166.5		90	"
08/19/0000	15.6	167.0		95	"
08/19/0600	15.7	167.7	943	100	Hurricane Cat. 3
08/19/1200	16.1	168.1		100	"
08/19/1800	16.5	168.5		110	"
08/20/0000	17.2	169.2		110	"
08/20/0600	17.8	169.5		100	"
08/20/1200	18.6	169.7		90	Hurricane Cat. 2
08/20/1800	19.0	170.0		80	Hurricane Cat. 1
08/21/0000	19.5	170.3	981	75	"
08/21/0600	20.6	170.6		65	"
08/21/1200	20.9	171.1		55	Tropical Storm

08/21/1800	21.2	171.6		45	"
08/22/0000	21.5	172.8		40	"
08/22/0600	21.9	173.5		35	"