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In this undated oil-on-cardboard painting, James E. Buttersworth depicts how awful the weather can be—and how difficult it often is—for a ship rounding [Cape Horn](#). Here we see Buttersworth's rendering of the "Clipper Ship *Feudding*" before a gale at the Cape. It took the *Essex* about a month to round Cape Horn.

As the *Essex* began its long voyage to the Pacific, by first sailing in the Atlantic, her crew sighted no whales for weeks.

Crew members would rotate their turns at the top of a ship mast, searching for the blow of a whale. After a two-hour stint, the next man would shimmy to the top of the square-rigger.

The journey south could not be direct because the ship was at the mercy of the Atlantic's prevailing winds. To reach Cape Horn at the bottom of South America, where the *Essex* could finally head west, then north to the Pacific coast off Peru, the crew had to follow a zig-zagging course.

It went something like this:

- Leaving [Nantucket](#), the westerlies pushed the ship south and east as the men headed toward Europe and Africa—and [the Azores](#)—(not South America).
- Catching the northeast trades, the *Essex* crossed the Atlantic in the other direction as she finally could sail toward [South America](#) and [Cape Horn](#).
- Reaching the [equator off Equador](#)—in a mostly windless area known as the doldrums—she moved slowly south and west until she caught the southeast trades.
- Picking-up variable winds, *Essex* moved closer to Cape Horn where—like other ships—she was at the mercy of the westerlies which usually make rounding the Horn very difficult.

Less than a week out of Nantucket, and long before the crew reached the Horn, *Essex* encountered her first misfortune. The sky turned an ominous color, telling the men that a squall was on its way.

Instead of preparing to ride out what could be a really bad storm, Captain Pollard decided to keep making good time. Not until it was too late did he order his crew to change sails so they could deal with the storm.

When a really bad gust hit the *Essex*, she was sideways to the wind ... the worst-possible position. The weather was frighteningly bad by this point, and the *Essex* could not resist the wind's pressure.

She rolled over, nearly ninety degrees, onto her side - knocked down on her "beam ends."

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/KNOCKDOWN-of-the-ESSEX-In-the-Heart-of-the-Sea-The-Tragedy-of-the-Whaleship-Essex>

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## Media Stream



### Rounding Cape Horn in Bad Weather

"Clipper Ship at Cape Horn," by James E. Buttersworth (1817-1894), online via Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

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