

# Experimental observation and theoretical description of multi-soliton fission in shallow water

S. Trillo<sup>1</sup>, G. Deng,<sup>2</sup> G. Biondini,<sup>2,3</sup> M. Klein,<sup>4</sup> G. F. Clauss,<sup>4</sup> A. Chabchoub,<sup>5,6</sup> M. Onorato,<sup>7,8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Dipartimento di Ingegneria, Università di Ferrara, Via Saragat 1, 44122 Ferrara, Italy*<sup>†</sup>

<sup>2</sup>*State University of New York at Buffalo, Department of Physics, Buffalo, NY 14260-2900*

<sup>3</sup>*State University of New York at Buffalo, Department of Mathematics, Buffalo, NY 14260-2900*

<sup>4</sup>*Ocean Engineering Division, Technical University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany*

<sup>5</sup>*Department of Mechanical Engineering, Aalto University, 02150 Espoo, Finland*

<sup>6</sup>*Department of Ocean Technology Policy and Environment,*

*Graduate School of Frontier Sciences, The University of Tokyo, Kashiwa, Chiba 277-8563, Japan*

<sup>7</sup>*Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Torino, Via P. Giuria, 1, 10125 Torino, Italy*

<sup>8</sup>*Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare, Sezione di Torino, Via P. Giuria, 1, 10125 Torino, Italy* \*

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We observe the dispersive breaking of cosine long waves [Phys. Rev. Lett. 15, 240 (1965)] in shallow water, characterising the highly nonlinear “multi-soliton” fission over variable conditions. We provide new insight into the interpretation of the results by analysing the data in terms of the periodic inverse scattering transform for the Korteweg-de Vries equation. In a wide range of dispersion and nonlinearity, the data compare favourably with our analytical estimate, based on a rigorous WKB approach, of the number of emerging solitons. We are also able to observe experimentally the universal Fermi-Pasta-Ulam recurrence in the regime of moderately weak dispersion.

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*Introduction.*— In a paper that gave birth to modern soliton science [1], Zabusky and Kruskal (ZK) showed that cosine waves propagating according to the weakly dispersing Korteweg-de Vries (KdV) equation [2] undergo a gradient catastrophe that generates “solitons”. Their interaction leads to recursive behavior, thus confirming, in the continuum limit, the phenomenon discovered by Fermi-Pasta-Ulam (FPU) for oscillator chains [3].

Recently, problems involving the dispersive breaking of waves have attracted renewed interest, thanks to experiments in nonlinear optics, Bose Einstein condensation, electron beams, and spin waves, which reported the catastrophe-induced generation of solitons [4–6], dispersive shock waves [7, 8], and different regimes of FPU recurrence [9, 10]. Specific experiments for the *periodic* case were reported just recently by exploiting an optical harmonic (or modulated) wave ruled by the nonlinear Schrödinger model [11]. Conversely, for the KdV equation, little progress has been made since the early experiments on breaking of periodic waves in electrical transmission lines, water and ion acoustic waves [12–15]. In particular, in experiments on surface gravity waves, the recurrence phenomenon predicted by ZK remained elusive, and the observation of fission was limited to a few solitons [13, 16, 17], which left open even basic questions such as how many solitons can be expected to emerge under variable experimental conditions. Furthermore, a comprehensive interpretation of experimental data in terms of inverse scattering transform (IST, also known as nonlinear Fourier Transform) [16, 18, 19], and in particular the finite-gap theory valid for the periodic case [20–22], is still lacking, also due to the intrinsic difficulty to obtain analytical predictions.

In this Letter we present an extensive experimental investigation performed in a long tank, which provides both evidence for recurrence and, at different water depths and wave amplitudes, a quantitative validity test of the KdV description of the multi-soliton fission. We also present a theoretical description combining IST and the Wentzel-Kramers-Brillouin (WKB) method which provides an analytical characterization of the experiment in terms of a formula that yields the number of soliton-like excitations as a function of a single overall dimensionless parameter quantifying the relative smallness of dispersive effects.

*Experiment.*— The experiment was performed in the sea-keeping basin of the Technical University of Berlin, which is 8 m × 110 m, with an effective measuring range of 90 m. On one side, a computer assisted wave generator is installed, which, in the present experiment, was utilized in piston-type mode. It provides a horizontal particle velocity profile at the wave board close to the physical one. The hydrodynamic transfer function of the wave generator is modelled using the Biesel function [26] relating the wave board stroke to the wave amplitude at the position of the wave maker linearly. On the opposite (downstream) side, a wave damping slope is installed to limit wave reflections. The setup comprises eight equally spaced wave gauges which are installed along the basin at distances  $z_j = 5 + (j - 1)10$  m,  $j = 1, 2, \dots, 8$ , from the wave maker located at  $z = 0$ . The computer controlled wave maker produced, after a short ramp, a burst of eight periods of a harmonic wave with adjustable elevation  $\eta_0$  and period  $T = 2\pi/\omega$ . We measured the elevation of the propagating wave train as time series  $\eta(t, z_j)$  at gauge locations  $z_j$ . Consistently, the theoretical framework is based on the following initial value problem, involving

the KdV equation, written as a dimensional evolution equation in space [25]

$$\eta_z + \frac{1}{c_0}\eta_t - \alpha\eta\eta_t - \beta\eta_{ttt} = 0; \quad \eta(t, 0) = \eta_0 \cos(\omega t), \quad (1)$$

where  $c_0 = \sqrt{gh}$  is the linear (non dispersive) velocity in shallow water of rest level  $h$ ,  $\alpha = \frac{3}{2}\frac{1}{c_0h}$ , and  $\beta = \frac{1}{6}\frac{h^2}{c_0^3}$ . The evolution dynamics is ruled by the interplay of two characteristic length scales associated with the temporal duration  $t_0$ , namely the nonlinear length  $L_{nl} = \frac{t_0}{\alpha\eta_0}$  and the dispersion length  $L_d = \frac{t_0^3}{\beta}$  (see also [27]). Without loss of generality, we set  $t_0 = \frac{T}{2\pi} = \frac{1}{\omega}$ , which amounts to choosing  $L_{nl}$  exactly equal to the breaking distance  $L_b = 1/\max[\frac{d}{dt}\alpha\eta(t, 0)] = 1/(\alpha\omega\eta_0)$  after which the cosine wave would develop the gradient catastrophe in the dispersionless limit  $\beta = 0$ . While  $L_{nl}$  determines the physical length scale for the critical steepening and the ensuing fission, the number of solitons that emerge from the process is determined only by the value of the dimensionless parameter  $\varepsilon^2 = 6L_{nl}/L_d = 2\omega^2h^3/(3\eta_0c_0^2)$ , which measures the smallness of dispersion, and is inversely proportional to the Ursell number [27, 28]. This can be seen by casting Eqs. (1) in dimensionless units as

$$u_\zeta - 6uu_\tau - \varepsilon^2u_{\tau\tau\tau} = 0; \quad u_0(\tau) = \cos(\tau) \quad (2)$$

where  $u(\zeta, \tau) = \eta/\eta_0$ ,  $\tau = \omega(t - z/c_0)$  is the normalized retarded time,  $\zeta = z/(6L_{nl})$ , and  $\varepsilon$  is the only parameter left. The value of  $\varepsilon$  is linked to that of the parameter  $\delta$  used by ZK as  $\varepsilon^2 = 6\pi^2\delta^2$  [1].

In the experiment, we measured the evolution of the waves at different depths  $h = 10, 15, 20, 26, 40$  cm and wave amplitudes  $\eta_0$ , which we always kept below the threshold  $\eta_0^{th}$  for the onset of turbulent breaking (note that  $\eta_0^{th}$  decreases proportionally to  $h$ ). Typical values of the parameters for four different runs at different depths are reported in Table I. The regime of run A [30], in which  $\varepsilon^2 \simeq 0.07$  is relatively large, essentially corresponds to the regime of early experiments characterized by very few emerging solitons ( $\leq 4$  in [13]). However, by decreasing the water depth  $h$ , one can obtain both a shorter nonlinear length  $L_{nl}$  and a smaller dispersion

	run A	run B	run C	run D	run E (recur.)
$\eta_0$ [cm]	3.11	1.84	1.70	1.24	5.50
$h$ [m]	0.4	0.2	0.15	0.1	0.4
$T$ [s]	14.0	14.1	14.0	14.1	5.0
$L_d$ [m]	3252	4713	5266	6651	147
$L_{nl}$ [m]	37.95	22.86	15.90	11.99	7.64
$\varepsilon^2$	0.0701	0.0290	0.0181	0.0107	0.3122

TABLE I. Experimental parameters for five representative runs: water depth  $h$ , initial amplitude  $\eta_0$ , period  $T$ , dispersion length  $L_d$ , nonlinear length  $L_{nl}$ , and dispersion smallness  $\varepsilon^2$  [related to  $\delta^2$  used by ZK as  $\delta^2 = \varepsilon^2/(6\pi^2)$ ]. See Fig. 1 for run B, Fig. 2 for runs C-D, Fig. 5 for run E.

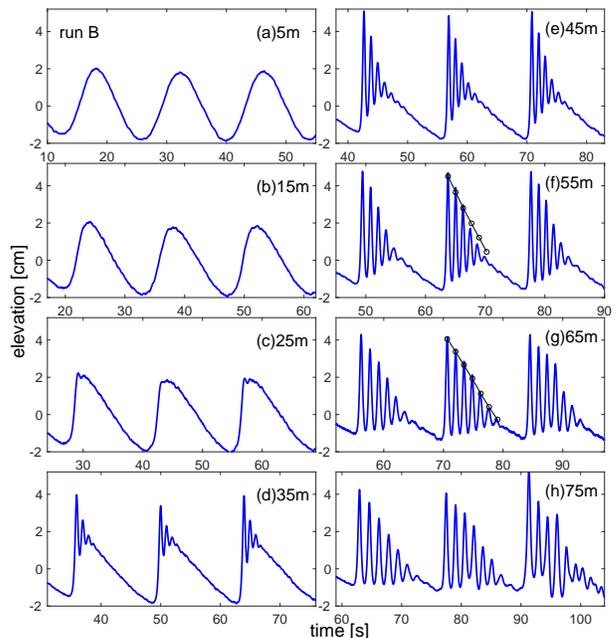


FIG. 1. Fission from three periods of a cosine wave with  $\eta_0 = 1.84$  cm in  $h = 20$  cm water (run B in Table 1). In order to follow the evolution of the same initial period, different time intervals are displayed. Open dots in (f,g) stand for soliton amplitudes computed from IST analysis of data sets (see text and Fig. 3(b)), recorded at 55,65 m.

parameter  $\varepsilon$ ; this follows from the fact that  $L_{nl} \sim h^{3/2}$ ,  $L_d \sim h^{-1/2}$ , and hence  $\varepsilon^2 \sim h^2$ . In particular, as shown in Table 1, at  $h = 20$  cm and  $\eta_0 = 1.84$  cm, run B corresponds to  $\varepsilon^2 \simeq 0.029$ , which is almost identical to the value  $\delta = 0.022$  considered by ZK [1]. The full measured evolution of this case is displayed in Fig. 1. Steepening occurs in time over the positive slope front of the cosine until tiny ripples appear to regularize the strong gradient observed at  $z_3 = 25$  m, which is close to the breaking distance  $z = L_{nl} \simeq 23$  m for the dispersionless limit  $\varepsilon = 0$ . Such oscillations expand and become deeper, forming undular bores at  $z_{4,5} = 35, 45$  m, until they eventually lead, at  $z_{6,7} = 55, 65$  m, to the formation of soliton-like excitations on a finite negative background, whose peaks scale approximately linearly. The peak amplitudes agree well with the predictions based on the IST analysis of data (see below) and reported as open dots in Fig. 1(f,g). As shown by the data recorded at last gauge, the fission proceeds until up to eight soliton-like excitations on the same background appear at  $z_8 = 75$  m, as shown in Fig. 1(h). Note that, at this stage, the regularity of the periods becomes affected by the residual reflection of the forefront periods arrived at the tank end.

When we further decrease the water depth to  $h = 15$  cm (run C in Table 1) and  $h = 10$  cm (run D in Table 1), the steepening is found to occur on a shorter length scale according to the reduced values of  $L_{nl}$  (see Table 1). In fact, as shown in Fig. 2(a,d), well developed os-

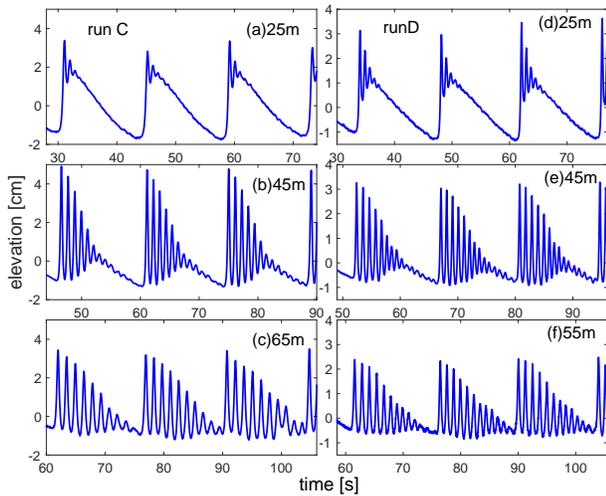


FIG. 2. Wave profiles: (a-c) run C,  $h = 15$  cm,  $\varepsilon^2 = 0.0181$ ; (d-f) run D,  $h = 10$  cm,  $\varepsilon^2 = 0.0107$ .

cillations already appear at  $z_3 = 25$  m. In this case, the fission gives rise to a maximum of 10 (at distance  $z_7 = 65$  m) and 12 (at  $z_6 = 55$  m) distinguishable solitons in the case of run C and run D, respectively. However, as  $\varepsilon^2$  decreases and the number of solitons increases, counting them by visual inspection of the time series becomes inappropriate for two basic reasons: (i) fission of solitons can proceed until the wave train exceeds one period of the cosine wave, a condition where shallow solitons can be easily hidden by the tall ones in the adjacent period; (ii) the waves produced through the dispersive breaking are not, strictly speaking, soliton solutions, but rather finite-gap solutions, and not all the bands correspond to visible excitations with soliton-like features. Therefore a criterion is needed to define the latter.

*IST data analysis.*— Both of the issues mentioned above can be successfully addressed by analyzing the experimental data in terms of the IST for periodic potentials (p-IST) [16, 18, 19]. Explicitly, the nonlinear wave components contained in the input monochromatic wave  $u_0(\tau) = \cos(\tau)$  can be computed via the direct scattering eigenvalue problem associated to Eq. (2), namely the time-independent Schrödinger equation

$$\varepsilon^2 \phi_{\tau\tau} + (\lambda + u) \phi = 0, \quad (3)$$

$\lambda$  being the spectral parameter. When  $u = u_0(\tau)$ , Eq. (3) is the Mathieu equation. Floquet (Bloch) theory implies that the spectrum of Eq. (3) decomposes into alternating bands and gaps, with the former corresponding to the waves that are embedded in the initial condition and progressively emerge from the fission. Of particular importance here is the main spectrum, which is invariant upon evolution, and is constituted by the band edges  $\lambda_{2n-1}$  and  $\lambda_{2n}$ ,  $n = 1, \dots, N$ , where  $N$  is the number of gaps. Such values are defined by the conditions  $T(\lambda_{2n-1}) = 1$  and  $T(\lambda_{2n}) = -1$  for  $n$  odd ( $1 \leftrightarrow -1$  for  $n$  even), where

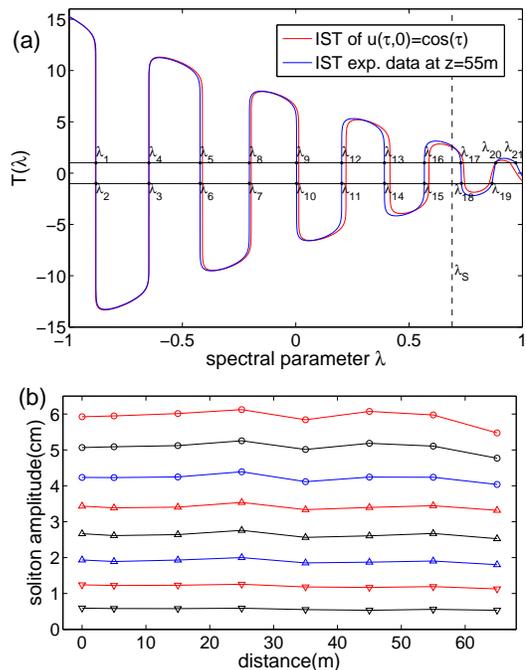


FIG. 3. (a) Half-trace of monodromy matrix  $T(\lambda)$  vs. spectral parameter  $\lambda$  at  $\varepsilon^2 = 0.029$  (ZK regime), comparing the ideal monochromatic case  $u_0 = \cos(\tau)$ , with normalized experimental data, run B,  $z_6 = 55$  m [Fig. 1(f)].  $\lambda_1, \dots, \lambda_{21}$  are the band edges;  $N_s = 8$  solitons correspond to the first eight bands on the left of  $\lambda_S$  (see text for its definition). This sets  $\lambda_{\text{ref}}$  to  $\lambda_{17}$  ( $2N_s + 1 = 17$ ). (b) Real-world soliton amplitudes  $2\eta_0[\lambda_{17}(z_j) - \lambda_{2n}(z_j)]$ ,  $n = 1, \dots, 8$ , obtained from the p-IST analysis, as reported in (a), of recorded elevation  $\eta(t, z_j)$  at gauge distances  $z_j$  (data at  $z = 0$ , obtained from  $u_0 = \cos(\tau)$ , are reported for reference).

$T(\lambda) = \frac{1}{2} \text{Trace}(M)$  and  $M$  is the monodromy matrix associated with Eq. (3) [16, 18, 19]. The corresponding spectral bands are  $[\lambda_{2n-1}, \lambda_{2n}]$ ,  $n = 1, \dots, N$ , plus  $[\lambda_{2N+1}, \infty)$ , for which  $|T(\lambda)| \leq 1$ . Solitons are obtained in the limit where the band widths shrink to zero, i.e. the band edges coincide,  $\lambda_{2n-1} = \lambda_{2n}$ . This condition is never strictly satisfied in the periodic case. Nevertheless, one can say that the  $n$ -th band yields an effective soliton if the relative bandwidth  $W_n = w_n/(w_n + g_n)$  is sufficiently small,  $w_n = \lambda_{2n} - \lambda_{2n-1}$  and  $g_n = \lambda_{2n+1} - \lambda_{2n}$  being respectively the band width and the adjacent gap width. A suitable choice is  $W_n \leq \kappa$ , with  $\kappa = 0.01$  [32]. Under these conditions the soliton amplitudes can be calculated as  $A_n = 2(\lambda_{\text{ref}} - \lambda_{2n})$ ,  $n = 1, \dots, N_s$ , where  $\lambda_{\text{ref}} = \lambda_{2N_s+1}$  stands for the reference level [30], and  $N_s < N$  is the number of solitons (bands fulfilling  $W_n \leq \kappa$ ) [21, 29].

To determine the number of solitons  $N_s$  in the experiment, we compared the p-IST spectrum for a cosine wave  $u_0(\tau) = \cos \tau$  with the spectrum of the measured data. That is, for the latter we replaced  $u$  in Eq. (3) with the normalised recorded data  $u_j(\tau) = \eta(\omega t, z_j)/\eta_0$ , which

amounts to measuring the amplitude in units of  $\eta_0$  and to normalising the period to  $2\pi$ . The results of such analysis are shown in Fig. 3 for run B, corresponding to the ZK regime. In particular, Fig. 3(a) compares the half-trace  $T(\lambda)$  for the pure cosine input and the data measured at distance  $z_6 = 55$  m, displaying very good agreement between the two. Of the ten total bands, only the first eight fulfil the criterium  $W_n \leq \kappa$  (those on the left of the threshold  $\lambda_s$ ), giving rise to 8 soliton-like excitations in agreement with the visual count from Fig. 1. We repeated this analysis at distances  $z_j$ ,  $j = 1, \dots, 7$  (gauge 8 was excluded due to the presence of reflection). The dimensional soliton amplitudes  $\eta_0 A_n = 2\eta_0(\lambda_{\text{ref}} - \lambda_{2n})$ , obtained from the calculated band edges at  $z = z_j$ , are plotted in Fig. 3(b) as a function of distance, which shows a good degree of constancy, confirming the spectrum invariance upon evolution.

We performed the above analysis for all recorded data sets, obtaining  $N_s$  as a function of  $\varepsilon$ . The p-IST results were obtained by numerically integrating Eq. (3), as in [21, 29]. In the case of the pure cosine input, however, we can also obtain all spectral information analytically by employing the WKB expansion  $\phi(x) = A(x) e^{iS(x)/\varepsilon}$  in Mathieu equation. Leaving all the mathematical details to a separate publication for brevity [34], this approach allows us to obtain analytical expressions for the monodromy matrix  $M$  and the relative bandwidths  $W_n$ , from which we estimate  $N_s$  as

$$N_s = \lfloor \frac{2S_1(\lambda_s)}{\pi\varepsilon} + \frac{1}{2} \rfloor, \quad (4)$$

$\lfloor \cdot \rfloor$  being the floor function,  $S_1(\lambda) = 2\sqrt{1+\lambda}E(\varphi, k)$  and  $E(\cdot)$  the incomplete elliptical integral of second kind with argument  $\varphi = [\pi - \cos^{-1}(\lambda)]/2$  and modulus  $k = \sqrt{2/(1+\lambda)}$ . The value  $\lambda_s$ , which as before is the threshold at which  $W_n = \kappa$  [cf. Fig. 3(a)], can now be obtained as  $S_2(\lambda_s) = \varepsilon \ln(2/\pi\kappa)$ , with  $S_2(\lambda) = 4\sqrt{1-\lambda}E(\varphi, k)$  with  $\varphi = \cos^{-1}(\lambda)/2$  and  $k = \sqrt{2/(1-\lambda)}$ . The comparison between the estimate in Eq. (4) and the number of solitons obtained from all available data sets (by applying the p-IST numerical analysis illustrated in Fig. 3) is displayed in Fig. 4, which shows a very good agreement even at relatively large values of  $\varepsilon$ , where the WKB is expected to be less accurate. Some discrepancy is observed in the most nonlinear runs at  $h = 10$  cm, where, however, the effect of losses and the non-uniformity of the bottom become non-negligible. We also remark that a suitable expansion of Eq. (4) [35] shows that  $N_s$  scales at leading order as  $1/\varepsilon \sim \sqrt{\eta_0}/\omega h$ , in agreement with heuristic estimates given in the past [15, 33]. Similar expansions also yield explicit estimates for the soliton amplitudes, which confirm the nearly linear variation of soliton peaks as observed in Figs. 1 and 2 and pointed out by ZK [1].

*Recurrence.*— In the ZK regime (run B), recurrence is expected at  $z \simeq 690$  m ( $\zeta \simeq 5.067$ ), clearly beyond most tank facilities. However, recurrence can be experimen-

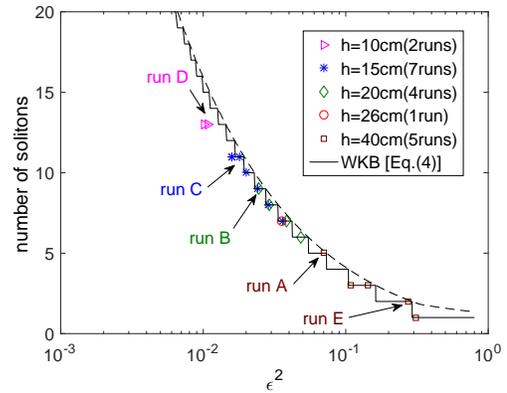


FIG. 4. Number of solitons  $N_s$  vs. dispersion smallness  $\varepsilon^2 = \frac{2\omega^2 h^2}{3g\eta_0}$ , as extracted from p-IST of experimental data at  $z_6 = 55$  m. Equal symbols and colors indicate data sets recorded at same depth  $h$ . The solid line stands for the WKB result in Eq. (4),  $\kappa = 0.01$ , with its envelope (dashed line) emphasizing leading order dependence  $N_s \sim 1/\varepsilon$ .

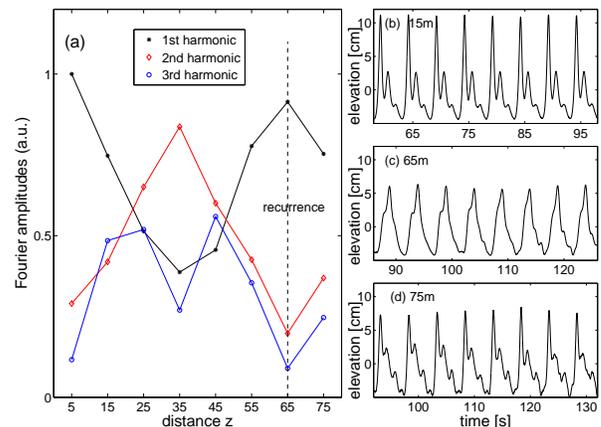


FIG. 5. Recurrence observed for run E,  $h = 40$  cm: (a) Fourier mode evolution from data measured at the eight gauge locations  $z_j$ ; (b-d) Wave profiles at  $z_2 = 15$  m,  $z_7 = 65$  m (recurrence),  $z_8 = 75$  m (new cycle of fission).

tally observed with shorter  $L_{nl}$  but larger ratio  $L_{nl}/L_d$ , as obtained, e.g. in run E in Table 1. In this case, fission gives rise to three clearly visible nonlinear waves, as shown in Fig. 5. The recurrence is clearly recognized from the evolution of the amplitudes of the first three Fourier modes (see Fig. 5(a)), obtained from the recorded data [3]. Similarly to what happens in FPU (compare with Fig. 1 in [3]), the second mode attains maximum energy when the fundamental one is most depleted, then the process is reversed until the fundamental mode takes back his energy  $z_7 = 65$  m. Meanwhile the third mode is characterised by a double cycle of amplification and deamplification. At 65 m we observe a good recurrence of the initial condition, followed by a new cycle of fission starting at 75 m.

*Conclusions.*— We presented extended observations

of multi-soliton fission and recurrence in surface gravity waves which show good agreement with novel analytical predictions on the number of emerging solitons, based on a WKB reduction of the scattering problem associated with the KdV equation. These results will be crucial to understand more complex phenomena such as wave runup [36] and coastal evolution of tsunamis [37], and, given the universality of the dispersive breaking of waves, constitute a viable general approach to understand experiments ruled by other integrable models.

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\* miguel.onorato@gmail.com; †stefano.trillo@unife.it

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