



Seven Came Through

By Captain Eddie Rickenbacker

*To men afloat in the Pacific, survival
is the drama of life . . . or death*

Men have been lost at sea before; others have spent more days on rafts than we did. A good deal of what we went through was what you might expect—hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and a slow rotting away. In some respects, the period from the second to the eighth day was the worst. A glassy calm fell upon the sea; the sun beat down fiercely all day; the rafts stood still, with the lines slack between; I even imagined I smelled flesh burning, and the sweet stink of hot rubber.

Face, neck, hands, wrists, legs, and ankles burned, blistered, turned raw, and burned again. In time DeAngelis and Whittaker, having darker skins, developed a protecting tan, but the rest of us cooked day after day. My hands swelled and blistered; when the salt water got into the flesh, it burned and cracked and dried and burned again. Three months later the scars still show on the knuckles. Our mouths became covered with ugly running sores. Reynolds, having no covering for his legs, turned into a sodden red mass of hurt. Even the soles of his feet were burned raw.

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These first five or six days were the worst I have ever known. The night I lay in a wrecked plane near Atlanta, with a dead man half crushed under my chest, had produced its own kind of suffering. But then the pain had been dulled by delirium, and after a while I knew help was near because I could hear people moving around in the dark. But on the Pacific I was something being turned on a spit. Without my hat, I would have been badly off. I would fill it with water, then jam it down over my ears. Before our rescue, the brim was half torn away from the crown.

Some of the others, to escape the terrible heat, paddled for hours in the water. But they paid a stiff price for the relief because their flesh burned again as it dried, and the salt brine stung. Without my handkerchiefs we would have had a much harder time. I passed them around and, folded bandit-fashion across the nose, they protected the lower part of the face. But there was no sparing the eyes. The sea sent back billions of sharp splinters of light; no matter where one looked it was painful. A stupor descended upon the rafts. Men simply sat or sprawled, heads rolling on the chest, mouths half open, gasping. Reynolds, from the cut on his nose, was a horrible sight. The sun would not let the wound heal. He washed the blood off with salt water, but it soon oozed again, spreading over his face, drying in a red crust. Bartek, too, was in agony from his cut fingers. He splashed them with iodine from the first-aid kit, but the salt water ate it away.

Daytimes we prayed for the coolness of the nights; nights we craved the sun. But I really came to hate the nights. Daytimes, I could see my fellow men, the play of the water, the gulls, all the signs of life. But the night brought us all close to fear. A cold, dense mist always rose around us. The damp soaked our clothes and we pressed together for warmth. Sometimes, when the mist was very heavy, the other rafts would be hidden. If the sea was calm and the

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line had fallen slack, I would sometimes come out of a nightmare, and pull in the towlines until they fetched up hard, and I knew the others were still there. Other times, I would hear moans or groans, or a cry and often a prayer. Or I would see a shadow move and twist as a man tried to ease his torture.

I know I can never hope to describe the awful loneliness of the night. Perhaps it affected me more than the others. I seldom slept more than an hour or so at a time, and even then, it seemed, with one eye open and one ear cocked. That was because I was always worried that the man who was supposed to be on watch might doze off and let a ship go by. I have gotten along most of my life with a good deal less sleep than most men are accustomed to have. This habit stood me in good stead on the Pacific. But the younger men had trouble staying awake. The stupor induced by the terrific heat of the day, together with the lulling motion of the raft as it listed and fell on the swell—a motion that at times was not unlike that of a hammock—seemed to put them quickly to sleep.

What also made the night hard for me was that I could never stretch out. Someday I shall meet the man who decided these rafts could hold two men and five men each. When I do, he is either going to revise his opinions or prove them on a long voyage, under conditions I shall be happy to suggest. Adamson weighed over two hundred pounds and I was not much lighter. On our five-man raft, he and Bartek and I shared an inside room measuring six feet nine inches by two feet four inches. Counting the narrow inflated roll, on which a man could stretch out for an hour or so with his feet dangling in the water, the dimensions were nine feet by five.

Because Adamson was in such pain, Bartek and I gave him one end to himself. He lay with his bumpus on the bottom, his head against the carbon-dioxide bottle, his feet

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across the roll. Bartek and I lay facing each other, or back to back, with our legs crooked over the roll. This was the way it was in Cherry's boat. But Alex and DeAngelis in the two-man raft, although the smallest men, were much worse off. They had to sit facing each other, one with his legs over the other man's shoulders, while he took the legs of the other under his armpits, or they sat back to back, dangling their legs in the water. And sometimes DeAngelis lay sprawled out, with Alex on his chest. Imagine two men in a small, shallow bathtub, and you will have a reasonably good idea of how much room they had.

Whenever you turned or twisted, you forced the others to turn or twist. It took days to learn how to make the most of the space, at an incalculable price in misery. A foot or hand or shoulder, moved in sleep or restlessness, was bound to rake the raw flesh of a companion. With the flesh, tempers turned raw and many things said in the night had best be forgotten.

The moon was turning into full. I was awake a good part of the time, hoping to catch the loom of a ship. In those first nights of utter calm the clouds would form the most unusual pictures, beautiful women, elephants, birds. It sounds fantastic. I remember seeing one shaped like a wild boar. I saw trees, completely formed.

The first two or three nights I thought I was seeing things. Finally I mentioned it to Adamson and he agreed with me that they were there. There was some reason for them because you could see them night in and night out, particularly during the first ten days. The moonlight helped to make these forms seem more vivid. I suppose there is a scientific explanation but I don't know what it is.

The forms were so vivid, so concise, so positive that they fascinated me. This helped some; it gave me something to think about during the long hours of the night.

The stars helped also to keep our minds occupied. We

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were on the equator and so all the familiar stars were in different positions, the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the North Star. We used to talk about them. Colonel Adamson had been in charge of the Planetarium in New York for a number of years and he was able to tell us a great deal about the different constellations and the movements of the stars. I kept promoting these discussions because of the good it did all of us.

What bothered us most of all was not knowing where we were. Every member of the party had his own ideas about this. I was under the impression—and later events confirmed it—that we were somewhere west or northwest of our island destination. Captain Cherry agreed with me in this.

The next day a terrible calm settled down which made the sea just like a glassy mirror. There were very little swells only and the sun was intensely hot. The glare was terrible on the eyes and most of the boys fell into a doze or sort of stupor. Most of them had injuries of one kind or another to add to their plight. I was afraid that Sergeant Reynolds had a broken nose. In getting out he had struck his head against the radio and the blood had dried on his face. He had no hat and the sun was beginning to burn him badly, and the combination made him an awesome-looking spectacle. Bartek had had all his fingers cut on the inside of the hand, two of them to the bone, and they had bled very badly. We had hauled out the iodine from the first-aid kit as soon as we settled down on the rafts and had done what we could do to dress the fingers. The effect did not last long because the salt water would take it off. It would get into the little cuts and so kept him in agony for the first two or three nights. Finally, of course, it dried out and started to heal.

On the fourth morning the second orange was divided. Except for the orange on the second morning, we had then

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been seventy-two hours without food or liquid. Fish were all around; I could see hundreds swimming idly just below the raft. Cherry and I fished for hours with pieces of orange peel. I even borrowed Adamson's key ring, which was shiny, and tried to manipulate it as a spinner. The fish would nose the hook, fan their tails in curiosity, but they never struck.

For six days on that glassy, sizzling sea, the rafts did not seem to move. But by our watches we knew we were drifting; each morning the sun rose just a little bit later. This meant the rafts were inching west and south. We argued interminably over where we were, but it turned out only Cherry and I were right. We were positive of having overshoot our island and, if our guess was true, we could count on no land nearer than certain Japanese-held islands four hundred to five hundred miles away. I studied the map two or three times a day, always returning it to my inside coat pocket, to protect it against the water. But the colors were already beginning to run.

Commencing the second night, Cherry sent up a flare every night. Having eighteen, we first decided to use three a night, the first after sundown, the second around midnight, the last before dawn. But of the first three sent aloft, one was a complete dud and the second flickered for only a few seconds. The third, swinging on its parachute, gave a scary, binding red light, lasting perhaps a minute and a half. Next night, cutting down the expenditure to two good ones, we had another dud; this decided us to reduce the nightly allotment to a single good one.

Always, after the light had exhausted itself, my eyes strained into the darkness, hoping to catch a responding gleam—a gleam which would not settle into the steadiness of a star. It was plain that unless we soon had food or water or the terrible hot calm relented, some of us were bound to die. Adamson, being portly, felt the heat worse than the rest. Reynolds, thin anyway, was fading to skin and bones.

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Alex, though, was really in a bad way. His mouth was dry and frothing; he cried continually for water. He was only a boy—barely twenty-two—and thinking he was quitting, I pulled his raft in close and asked why the hell he couldn't take it? It was a brutal thing to do, yet I was determined to shock him back to his senses. I found out then what was wrong. He was only three weeks out of the hospital. In addition, he had contracted a lip disease, something like trench mouth, with a scientific name I do not remember. All this had left him with less strength than the rest from the start, and the salt water he swallowed when his raft capsized had helped to do him in.

Unfortunately for him that wasn't the only salt water Alex had had. DeAngelis woke one night to find him half out of the raft, gulping salt water. Now I had admonished everybody the first afternoon out not to drink salt water, knowing that it would drive them wild with thirst. Alex admitted he had been doing this persistently. It explained the cries for water we didn't have. "I tried not to," Alex said, "but I had to. I just had to have water."

So it was only a question of time for poor Alex. He sank deeper into delirium, murmuring his "Hail Mary" and other Catholic prayers. In his wallet was a photograph of a young girl to whom he was engaged: he talked to it, prayed over it. Finally he could neither sleep nor lie down. DeAngelis tried to keep the sun off him, but there was no shadow anywhere. So he burned and burned. At night in the moonlight I could see him sitting on the raft shaking as if with ague. He literally vibrated, he was so horribly cold. Yet, except to cry for water, he never really complained.

Bartek had a New Testament in his jumper pocket. Watching him read it, the thought came to me that we might all profit by his example. I am not a religious man, but I was taught the Lord's Prayer at my mother's knee and I had gone to Sunday School. If I had any religion in

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my later life, it was based on the Golden Rule. Yet I have always been conscious of God.

With the New Testament as an inspiration, we held morning and evening prayers. The rafts were pulled together, making a rough triangle. Then, each in turn, one of us would read a passage. None of us, I must confess, showed himself to be very familiar with them, but thumbing the book we found a number that one way or another bespoke our needs. The Twenty-third Psalm was, of course, a favorite. I have always been stirred by it, but out on the Pacific I found a beauty in it that I had never appreciated. Yet there was another that we never failed to read, because it so clearly set forth what was in our minds:

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

... For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all of these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. (*Matthew 6:31-34.*)

One or two turned scornful and bitter because the answer was slow in coming, but the rest went on praying with deep-felt hope. Yet we did not neglect anything that might help us to help ourselves. Whittaker tried to make a spear from one of the aluminum oars, tearing the flat corners away with the pliers. He drove it into the back of a shark which rubbed alongside, but the hide was tougher than the point. After several tries it was so blunted as to be useless. Whittaker threw it angrily into the bottom of the raft. He had gained nothing and wasted an oar.

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Also, Cherry sat all day long with a loaded revolver in his lap, hoping to knock down a gull. But none came close enough for a shot. He broke the revolver open two or three times a day and rubbed the moving parts with oil from his nose and the back of his ears, but he could not halt the sea-water corrosions. When the parts froze solid he threw the gun into the Pacific. Adamson's gun rusted in the same way and I dropped it over the side.

To keep the sick men alive, we finished the oranges faster than we had intended. We had the third on the morning of the fifth day, the last on the sixth. The last two were shrunken, much of the juice appeared to have evaporated, and the last one was beginning to rot. So long as there was that sliver of orange to anticipate, no one complained of hunger. Now, memories of food and drink began to haunt us. We tried to catch the sharks that cruised near the rafts with our hands. I actually had several small ones by the back but the hide was too slippery for a firm grip.

The desire for food in several men became almost violent. They agonized over their hunger pains and talked constantly about food, and whether they could go on much longer without it.

Reynolds talked about how much soda pop he was going to drink the rest of his life. Cherry couldn't think about anything but chocolate ice cream. As I listened to the thirsty talk between the rafts, my own mind slowly filled with visions of chocolate malted milk. I could actually taste it, to the point where my tongue worked convulsively. The strange part is that I hadn't had a chocolate malted milk in nearly twenty-five years.

From the start I had advised against talk as I realized how necessary it was going to be for all of us to conserve our strength in every way possible, but looking back now I am rather amazed at the little talking that we did.

During the first few days, while we suffered from the

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shock of the fall and our minds were filled with speculation as to the chances of rescue, there was much more than later. This was particularly noticeable after several days had passed and the prospect of escape was becoming dimmer. It was then we began to sing hymns after prayer meetings. The singing seemed to release something in the minds of most of us and the talk for the first time became intensely personal. As I have already stated, there was no time that I lost faith in our ultimate rescue, but the others did not seem to share this state of mind fully with me. My companions clearly began to think of what lay beyond death and to think of it in terms of their own lives.

They began to tell of what they had experienced in life; their hopes, fears, ambitions, their achievements, their mistakes. I suppose it takes the imminence of death to release one completely from inhibitions. The talk was entirely honest and, I am sure, entirely frank. What was said will always be locked up in our minds. As far as I am concerned, no hint of those long, man-to-man conversations will ever be revealed. I am sure of one thing, that it did us a great deal of good.

As the days wore on and our strength left us, we talked less and less. A drowsiness, which in the later stages amounted almost to coma, had taken possession of us. We would lie for hours in the intense heat of the sun without a single word being spoken. What I seem to remember most about the last days was the almost complete silence. If one man spoke there would be no response. We were so completely divorced from living that we had nothing to talk about, even if we had had the strength for it.

I recall no mention of the war. It was continually in my own mind because of my conviction of survival. I was sure I would live to see the struggle through, and consequently did not get away from the speculations that I would have engaged in under normal conditions. I never put them into

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words, however. If my companions were thinking along the same line, they observed the same reticence that I did.

All conversation during the last stages had to do with the changes of position we found necessary in the rafts and the negative results of the Very lights we set off. Sometimes our hopes would kindle when one of us mistook a low star for the light of a ship. There would be eager discussion then, dwindling off into hopeless silences when it became certain that it had been nothing more than a delusion.

Twenty-one days of it, and during all that time, I am inclined to believe, we talked less than we would have done in the course of one normal day.

The eighth day was another hot, flat calm. It did not help our stomachs any to look down and see dolphin and mackerel, sleek and fat, twelve to eighteen inches long, and thousands of smaller fish swimming in the depths. That afternoon Cherry read the service, with the usual quotation from Matthew. About an hour later, when I was dozing with my hat pulled down over my eyes, a gull appeared from nowhere and landed on my hat.

I don't remember how it happened or how I knew he was there. But I knew it instantly, and I knew that if I missed this one, I'd never find another to sit on my hat. I reached up for him with my right hand—gradually. The whole Pacific seemed to be shaking from the agitation in my body, but I could tell he was still there from the hungry, famished, almost insane eyes in the other rafts. Slowly and surely my hand got up there; I didn't clutch, but just closed my fingers, sensing his nearness, then closing my fingers hard.

I wrung his neck, defeathered him, carved up the body, divided the meat into equal shares, holding back only the intestines for bait. Even the bones were chewed and swallowed. No one hesitated because the meat was raw and stringy and fishy. It tasted fine. After Cherry had finished his piece, I baited a hook and passed it over to him. The



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hook, weighted with Whittaker's ring, had hardly got wet before a small mackerel hit it, and was jerked into the raft. I dropped the other line, with the same miraculous result, except that mine was a small sea bass.

All this food in the space of a few minutes bolstered us beyond words. We ate one of the fish before dark and put the other aside for the next day. Even the craving for water seemed to abate, perhaps from chewing the cool, wet flesh while grinding the bones to a pulp. Alex and Adamson ate their shares, and I was optimistic enough to believe they were immediately better. I say in all truth that at no time did I ever doubt we would be saved, but as the eighth night rose around us I was sure we could last forever. The ocean was full of fish, and we could catch them.