

Lifeboat by David Gray

There were countless desperate stories of survival and death that took place in lifeboats at sea during the Second World War. I have gathered together here just a few news stories that I have come across in order to convey at least an idea of the horrors that survivors had to face, when even making it safely into a lifeboat did not guarantee survival.

A Story from March 23rd 1941

'Far out in the Atlantic a ship was bringing a cargo to Britain. A British ship. From out of the grey sea came a torpedo. In a few moments the ship was sinking. Ten men got away in time...ten men left by the enemy to die. They had time only to lower a raft...a flimsy thing of struts of wood, like a train seat or chicken coop. The raft you see in these pictures.



All they had on board to succour them were six tins of condensed milk and half a gallon of water. They had taken bearings shortly before the ship was torpedoed. The nearest land was 800 miles away...Ireland. Between them and that land lay 800 miles of sea, freezing winter weather...and a few struts of wood.

And so they started six days of agony.

One by one the tins of condensed milk were opened...a sip taken now and then. At night they fastened themselves with their belts to the wooden struts while they snatched an hour's sleep. Even so, two were washed off by the heavy seas – and vanished.

Day after day they searched the horizon for a ship. Two more lost their reason and died.

Life Sailed Along

On the sixth day a ship sighted them – drew near. A warship, guarding the seas that are Britain's right. Within hailing distance, a lifeline was thrown from the ship's deck over the raft...you can see in the big picture the outstretched arms of men on the raft to catch this line of life. It fell true, in the smaller picture one of the men pulling on the lifeline is drawing the raft to the ship's side. The men were lifted aboard nearly stiff with cold.

Life had cheated death once more.

The men reached England; a few hours later they had applied for another ship. Now they are sailing again...bringing more cargoes to England. Of such is the timbre of the men who man the Merchant Navy...such is their magnificent contribution to Victory. The pictures were sent to the *Daily Mirror* by a reader who helped in the rescue.'

A Story from April 25th 1941

'Bomber Crew Adrift 3 Days in Dinghy

All five members of the crew of an R.A.F. bomber have been rescued after spending three days and two nights at sea in their rubber dinghy, says the Air Ministry News Service.

They had dropped all their bombs on their target in Germany, but during the attack the aircraft was hit by shrapnel in many places. All went well until they got to the coast. Then the port engine began to falter. There were still several hundred miles to cover and it was not long before the other engine showed signs of weakening. The pilot started up the port engine again to give the other a rest, but it seized up and burst into flames.

Fire extinguishers were switched on by the second pilot and the aircraft dropped to within 100 feet of the sea. Everything possible was thrown overboard to lighten the aircraft. The wireless operator sent out the signal "Landing on sea" and gave his own station the position.



Describing their experiences after getting away in the dinghy from their aircraft, which was burnt out, the navigator said they could see aircraft searching for them. The sea became rough, and the crew bailed out water with their leather caps and gloves and kept paddling westwards.

"Once we noticed black objects on the water and others just under the surface. We were in the middle of a minefield, but luckily, we got clear of it."

By day they steered by the sun. By night, they set their course by the stars. On the second day hunger and thirst became acute. On the evening of the third day a Hudson aircraft came low and dropped a bag within a few yards. They found in the bag brandy, biscuits and cigarettes. As darkness came the aircraft repeatedly dropped flares all round to mark the spot.

"Then we heard the pleasantest sound of all," said the pilot. "It was the chug-chug of a motor."

A story from November 1941

'Thirteen Days in an Open Boat

A 13-day ordeal in a 22-foot lifeboat, in which four of their shipmates died, was related by 10 British seamen and one Canadian seaman in the Eastern Canadian port where they were landed after being torpedoed in the Atlantic. The men were picked up by a Canadian corvette 300 miles from Canada. They are now in hospital suffering from swollen feet. Twenty-five other members of the crew of the same merchant ship are still missing in another boat.

Not Again!

The torpedoing was described by the ship's gunner, R. H. Baldry, of Edmonton, Alberta, who joined the Royal Navy at the outbreak of the war. He said, "I don't want such an adventure again. I was coming

off watch at midnight when the torpedo struck us in number two hold. There were 15 of us in the leeward boat, which was nearly sucked into the torpedo hole in launching it. After two hours two more torpedoes sank the ship. We did not see the submarine.”

No Boats Came

“We were wet through continually, and had little food and water. We massaged our legs to keep up the circulation. On the third day three American flying boats circled us for several hours, and dropped rations wrapped in lifebelts. They signalled in morse, but it was too fast for us to read. Then they flew off and were not seen again. No boats came.

On the seventh day the second engineer (Mr. Alexander Valder, born in Estonia) died. The fourth engineer (Mr. Raymond Barry, 38) from Ireland, read the funeral service.

Apprentice Dies

A 16-year-old apprentice (Reginald Hicks, of London) died on the ninth day. The tenth day the fourth engineer died. The wireless officer (Mr. James Harrower, 25) from Edinburgh, died an hour before we were picked up. The third officer (Mr. Leslie Allatt, 20) of Hull, took charge and shared out the meagre rations, consisting of chocolate, biscuits, malted milk tablets and water.”

They tried to catch rainwater in a sail but it proved undrinkable.

“We sailed westward, for we knew we must sight land ultimately,” said Mr. Allett. “Hope was gone, when on the 13th day a single plane flew over, and then the corvette was sighted with a convoy. We waved our hats and set off flares.”

The full list of survivors is:

- Leslie Allatt, 6, Westborne Crescent, Edinburgh Street, Hull.
- Sydney Walker (49) fireman, 8, South Close, South Shields.
- Frederick Speck, (64) boatswain, 27, Plasterton Gardens, Cardiff.
- Frank Ross, (21), gunner, 17, Adelaide Street, Wood Bottom, Shipley, Yorkshire.
- Benjamin Robertson, (23), fireman, 51, Albert Street, Edinburgh.
- George Jones, (27), army gunner, Edgware, Middlesex.
- R. H. Baldry, (27), gunner, Hastings, Sussex.
- Edward Connolly, (33), fireman, 43, Ellison Street, Jarrow-on-Tyne.
- Joseph Arckle, (21), fireman, 11, Albert Terrace, South Shields.
- Leslie Baxter, (19), apprentice, Eastbourne, Sussex.
- Thomas Price, (18), able seaman, Brabazon Street, Poplar.’

A story from March 31st, 1943 (Daily Telegraph)

‘Clung to Boat for 2½ Days – Award for Sole Survivor

This tale of heroism and endurance at sea was told in last night’s London Gazette: A ship sailing alone, was torpedoed 300 miles from land and sank in three minutes – so quickly that she took the chief officer’s boat down with her. The chief officer and two members of the crew reached an upturned

boat. For two days and a half they clung to the keel until calmer weather enabled them to right it. The boat was waterlogged, and nearly all the equipment, food and water had been washed away.

During the next six days two of the occupants died, leaving the chief officer alone. Five days later he was picked up.

Nine other members of the ship's crew had secured three rafts and lashed them together. They tried without success to reach the chief officer's upturned boat. During the first night in heavy seas one of the rafts broke adrift and disappeared with three men. The remaining two rafts kept together for 10 days, when one of the men died.

Four Survivors

The rafts were capsized several times, and one began to break up. While the men were being transferred to the sound raft, one of them was lost. The four survivors drifted for another five days before they were picked up.

The men who survived this ordeal are given the following awards:

M.B.E.

- Chief Officer William Duncan, High Street, Aberdeen.
- Third Officer Kenneth Eaton, Gower Road, Swansea.
- Radio Officer Stanley Powell, Drake Street, Keighley.

B.E.M.

- Fireman George Cuthbert, West Park Road, South Shields.
- Seaman James Kirkwood, North Fort Street, Leith.

On Uninhabited Island

Seven men of another torpedoed crew, three of them injured, drifted on a raft for eight days through heavy seas until they were washed onto the rocks of an uninhabited island. Fishermen rescued them and took them to port. In this case the awards are:

B.E.M.

- Able Seaman Edward Mann, Chase Cross, Romford, Essex.
- Frederick Walters, Rush Green Road, Romford.

Survivors of another torpedoed ship clung to a raft for 26 hours before being picked up. They were rescued after distress signals were sent out while the Third Radio Officer held a broken wire in position until flames drove him away. The Master, Captain James Kennedy, Forester's Drive, Wallington, Surrey, is awarded the **O.B.E.** and Third Radio Officer Neil Coleman, Heaton Chapel, Stockport, becomes an **M.B.E.**

D.S.M. for Apprentice

A prisoner of war, eighteen-year-old Albert Geoffrey Allson, receives the **D.S.M.** When the merchant ship in which he was sailing as an apprentice was torpedoed and sunk, he swam about and manoeuvred two rafts to pick up members of the crew. He was captured while making his way to land.

The **D.S.M.** has also been awarded to a ship's fireman, Andrew Wilson, Lawrence Street, Sunderland. After two ships on which he served were sunk in the journey to North Russia he volunteered for a third voyage, and this time reached Russia safely.'



The picture *left*, taken during the Battle of the Atlantic, described at the time as one of the most dramatic of the war, shows the moment of rescue – after days adrift on an upturned lifeboat – of four British merchant seamen. Torpedoed hundreds of miles from land, they were first sighted as a speck on the ocean. Even when the rescuing warship drew near the men were unable to raise themselves.

Chief Officer William Duncan in the story above clung to a lifeboat like this for two and a half days until they could get it righted.