

SO CLOSE TO HOME

(When U-boats entered the Gulf of Mexico, Ray and Sonny Downs were among the first to fight for their lives after their ship was torpedoed.)

On May 19, 1942 a German U-boat in the Gulf of Mexico stalked its prey 50 miles off New Orleans. Captained by twenty-nine-year-old Iron Cross and King's Cross recipient Erich Wurdemann, the submarine set its sights on the freighter *Heredia* with 62 souls on board. Most of the crew were merchant seamen, but there were also a handful of civilians including the Downs family, consisting of the parents, Ray and Ina, along with their two children, eight-year-old Sonny, and eleven-year-old Lucille.

Fast asleep in their berths, the Downs family had no idea there were two torpedoes heading their way. When the ship exploded, chaos ensued and the mother and daughter were separated from the father and son. The following story follows the survival efforts of Ray and his eight year old son "Sonny".

— — —

After the torpedoes slammed into their ship Ray and Sonny Downs found themselves clinging to a four foot square balsa wood life raft along with ship's Captain Edwin Colburn and civilian George Conyea. It was 2a.m, with just a sliver of a moon, and the swells were large but gentle. The group could still see the U-boat's search light illuminating the bow of the *Heredia* that rose out of the ocean in a precarious angle. At any minute they expected disaster to strike in the form of bullets from the submarine, an explosion from the *Heredia*'s boiler, or a whirlpool of suction if the ship suddenly went down. Bits of debris floated all around them, but not a single other survivor could be seen.

Conyea started to say something, but Ray suddenly yelled, "I can hear my wife shouting! I'm going back!"

"You can't go back," hollered Captain Colburn. "You'll never make it!"

Conyea too shouted at Ray, "The ship is going to sink any minute! The sub is still there, I can see its light!"

"I don't care," boomed Ray, "I heard Ina!"

"You can't be sure it was her!" pleaded the captain.

Sonny was terrified that his father would leave him and never make it back. He watched in fear as his dad moved from the middle of the raft to the outer edge. Conyea positioned himself next to Ray, grabbing Ray's life jacket. "Your son needs you here!"

Ray swatted Conyea's arm away, then looked back at Sonny. He was torn between keeping his son alive and making a dash for the voice that he was sure was Ina's.

"Let's listen," reasoned Captain Colburn, "and see if we hear another shout."

Ray moved back toward Sonny.

The four survivors didn't speak as the raft drifted farther from the death throes of the *Heredia*, which continued to emit loud bubbling and gurgling noises as it settled lower in the water.

Finally the captain broke the silence. "The sub has moved off. I can't see its light."

"Can anyone see the ship?" asked Conyea.

Without the light from the sub, none of the survivors could see the vessel, nor could they hear the noises it had made just minutes earlier. Ray tried to put Ina out of his mind and focus on saving his son.

"We can sit on the edge of the raft," said Ray to the others, "but we gotta spread out." The balsa raft was hollow in the middle, like a box with no bottom.

Conyea took two strokes and perched on the edge opposite Ray, while the captain, his face in a tense grimace because he didn't know how to swim, slowly inched to the side just to the right of Ray and carefully pulled himself up. Sonny, who fortunately had just learned to swim in Costa Rica, went to the side of the square to the left of his father, pulling himself up and into a sitting position. Because Sonny only weighed a third as much as the other men, his side of the raft rode out of the water, while the captain's end rode so low that the water almost reached his neck.

"This won't do!" bellowed Ray. "One wave and we're going over. Mr. Conyea, you and I gotta scoot over closer to Sonny's side."

This simple move helped balance the raft. However the weight of the three men plus Sonny was enough to submerge the raft a few inches, so that from the waist down the survivor's bodies were underwater. It was a delicate balancing act, but at least they had their upper torsos relatively dry, which would help ward off hypothermia.

Ray glanced at Sonny, worried sick that the boy would be the first victim of the ocean because of his small size.

“Are you cold, son?”

“I’m okay, Dad.”

“Well, if you get really cold, just tell me, and you can sit on my lap and I’ll wrap my arms around you.”

The air temperature was in the upper 60’s and the water temperature about 75 degrees Fahrenheit. The relatively warm temperature of the ocean may not sound dangerous, but it is far short of the 98.6-degree optimal body temperature; and, making matters worse, water draws off a person’s heat about twenty-five times faster than the same air temperature. If Sonny’s core temperature dropped to 95 degrees, he’d start shivering, and soon his extremities would start to feel numb, as the blood vessels constricted. That is the body’s way of minimizing the amount of cold blood that would flow to the vital organs. Layers of fat would also slow the cooling of the blood, but eight-year-old Sonny was as thin as a sapling.

Ray vowed to himself that he’d do whatever it took to keep the boy warm, even if it meant hoisting him out of the water and somehow putting him on his shoulders.

In the darkness, Ray could faintly see Sonny’s shape but not the features of his face because high thin clouds blocked out most of the light from the stars and moon. Ray stared toward Sonny and thought *this is all my fault. I should have known the full danger when they made me sign the release papers before we boarded the ship.* He shook his head, realizing this kind of thinking was torture. *Stop. Just focus on Sonny.*

A minute later Sonny, as if reading his father’s thoughts, asked, “Will Mom and Lucille be all right?”

“They should be fine,” lied Ray. “They are probably floating on a raft just like us.”

“That’s right,” said Captain Colburn, “the ship had three rafts.”

“Where were we when the ship was torpedoed? How far from port?” asked Conyea of the captain.

“About forty miles out from New Orleans. To the southwest.”

Ray turned his head in the direction of the captain and asked, "When do you think help will come?"

Captain Colburn hesitated before answering, concerned about saying anything negative in front of Sonny.

"Just tell us the truth," said Ray. "We're going to be fine no matter how long we have to sit on this raft."

"Okay," said Colburn. "We were operating on radio silence, but that doesn't really matter because I think the section of the ship where the radio was took a direct hit from one of the torpedoes. So the authorities on shore only know that we were scheduled to reach New Orleans about 6 A.M. I'm guessing that by 8 A.M. they will become concerned. One of the patrol planes will start looking for us."

Conyey, who was from New Orleans, added, "and we might get lucky. There are probably several Coast Guard and shrimp boats in the area, and one of them may find us at dawn."

"You're right, Mr. Conyey," said Ray, "just gotta sit here patiently until the sun comes up."

"Call me George," said Conyey.

Ray nodded. Then each survivor settled in for a long night, lost in their own thoughts. Ray tried to make an honest assessment of their situation. They had no food or water. Once the sun came up, their thirst would increase, and dehydration would wear them down with each passing hour. The weather was calm, with just a light breeze, and for that Ray was thankful. If the seas had been up like the day before none of the four survivors would have been able to hang on to the flimsy raft. They were lucky indeed to be in gentle swells rather than breaking waves. However, they had no flares should a plane or patrol boat appear on the horizon. After days of sailing from South America, Ray had an appreciation for the vastness of the ocean, and he felt the little raft was like the proverbial needle in a haystack: it was going to be difficult to find. And a person in the water without a raft would be damn near impossible to locate. Ray said a silent prayer that Ina and Lucille were together on a raft and not alone in the endless void of the sea.

Around four in the morning, Sonny was shivering slightly. He could hardly believe how slowly the night was passing, as it seemed like it had been days ago that the *Heredia* was torpedoed. He knew he was supposed to tell his father if he was cold, but he thought it best not to say anything for a while. The grown-ups had stopped talking, but every now and then Sonny's dad would ask how he was doing.

“Sonny, it will be dawn soon, and we'll all get a chance to warm up in the sun.”

“Yes, Dad, I, I . . . know.”

Ray picked up the hesitation in the boy's voice and he could tell Sonny was shaking.

“Mr. Conyey, I mean George,” said Ray, “I'm going to have Sonny come sit with me, so you may need to shift position slightly.”

“Okay, it will be good to move. My back is as stiff as can be.”

Ray slid down to the end of his side of the raft closest to Sonny's side, and then said, “Sonny, you can scoot over to me, now.”

The boy had no trouble sliding to his father. It was wonderful to feel his dad's muscular arm pull him in tight so that he was leaning into his dad's chest. Sonny could feel himself relax, and began to examine the luminescent light where the gentle swells swirled around the raft. On board the ship, his father had called the eerie light phosphorescence, and Sonny was fascinated by the glowing plankton that shimmered in the night.

Feeling secure in his father's embrace, the boy closed his eyes for the first time since the ship was torpedoed. He must have dozed for a few minutes, but was awakened by a commotion.

“I’ve got it,” said Captain Colburn.

Sonny could see that the captain had something large in his hands but had no idea what it was.

“What’s happening, Dad?”

“We saw a board floating on the water, and the Captain was able to grab it. Might come in handy in the morning. Maybe use it as a paddle.”

A faint hint of dawn allowed the red-haired captain to better see his bleak surroundings. The grey canvas-covered raft seemed minuscule and so flimsy that he wondered how long it would take for the fabric to rip and the balsa wood to float free. He glanced at his shipwrecked mates. George Conyeya appeared exhausted, and he had said very little during the course of the night. The boy Sonny hadn’t cried once, but he looked so small and skinny that the captain knew he must be extremely cold. His father Ray had calmed down since he thought he heard his wife shouting, and he was now holding the boy close to his chest.

It crossed the captain’s mind that the four of them might be the only survivors of the ship; and if that were true, his own survival might become a lifelong burden and source of shame rather than a blessing. He could just imagine what the newspapers would say and what other mariners would think when they learned that of the entire list of working crewmembers on the *Heredia*, he, the captain, was the only one that lived. That would mean forty-eight of his crew had perished, six of the Navy Armed Guard, and five out of the eight passengers had perished—all on his ship, on his watch, during his leadership. He knew the notion that the captain should go down with the ship was still a

strong one. But, he thought, at least these three civilians on the raft with me can testify that we were the very last ones off the ship. It didn't ease his anguish, but it was something. . . .

Colburn had also been thinking about sharks on and off all night, doing his best to put the predators out of his mind. But when Ray Downs shifted positions slightly, the captain's eyes widened. In the gloom he saw a dark smudge on Ray Downs's knee.

"Is that blood or oil on your leg?" asked the captain.

"Blood," said Ray. "I cut myself trying to break through the window."

"Let me help you cover the wound. I can rip a piece of my shirt off."

"I can get it," answered Ray. "We've got the raft pretty well balanced, and the less moving around, the better."

Ray wore only a sleeveless T-shirt and his boxer shorts. He ripped a small patch of cloth from his T-shirt to tie around the cut.

Sonny watched his father's hands work. The gash looked deep and, even after more than three hours in the ocean, it was still trickling blood.

"How bad does it hurt, Dad?"

"Can barely feel it. Salt water stings a bit. This bulky life jacket bothers me as much as the cut, the way it's rubbing against my skin. I'll bet your life jacket is doing the same."

"I don't mind. I'm sure glad I had it on when we were climbing up the stairway from our cabin. I felt like I was being dragged to the bottom of the sea."

"Me, too," said Ray. "I tried to hold on to you, but the water just yanked you away."

“Did you try and grab my leg?”

“Don’t remember, everything happened so fast.”

“Something grabbed my leg and scared me so I kicked at it. Hope it wasn’t you. Hope it wasn’t Mom or Lucille.”

Ray winced. The thought of Ina and Lucille being pulled to the depths was more than he could bear. He had never been religious like his wife, but now he said a silent prayer. He thought it was a miracle that he had escaped the sinking ship, and maybe God did have a hand in his survival so he could be here with his son. Mixed with these thoughts of God was a brooding anger that bubbled to his consciousness periodically. His most intense fury was directed at the Germans on the submarine who had crossed an entire ocean and most of the Gulf to hunt down and torpedo a ship that wasn’t even part of the military. *They will pay for this*, he thought; *nobody hurts my family and gets away with it*. While the adrenaline prompted by thoughts of revenge coursed through his veins, he also felt rage toward another group: the nameless bureaucrats sitting safely in Corpus Christi who wouldn’t let his family leave the *Heredia* when anchored outside the bay. He wondered if the captain had really made a strong effort to persuade those same authorities to let the family de-board. Now, sitting on this floating sandbox just four feet from the captain, it took a supreme effort not to tell him exactly what he was thinking.

Ray looked down at the top of his son’s head and held him tighter. As much for himself as for Sonny, Ray corralled his emotions and said, “Your mom and Lucille are probably floating with a bunch of the ship’s sailors. They might even have been rescued by now.”

With the innocence of an eight-year-old, Sonny believed his father. Lucille is probably having breakfast on board a rescue boat and she's worried about me. And Mom's likely right by her side, just the way Dad is with me.

But a few minutes later, Sonny remembered that his Dad thought he had heard his mother shouting when they were still near the sinking ship. *Maybe they are not with sailors or rescued.* He was about to say something, to remind his father about his mother shouting for help, but decided it was best to let it go. *Don't upset him.*

Sonny wanted his father to be proud of what he said and did while on the raft.

Now that the boy could actually see the vastness of the ocean and their own insignificance, he felt a sense of fear and dread almost equal to when he had been washed from his father's grip when the ship lurched. He didn't want his father to know that the only thing keeping him from crying was his dad's presence.

Captain Colburn admired the way the boy and his father interacted. He wasn't so sure about how he and Ray would sort things out when and if a major decision needed to be made on the raft. He was still smarting from the exchange with Ray when they were launching the raft, how the man had poked him in the chest and shouted he'd have to learn to swim real fast. He wasn't about to start a fight earlier with the *Heredia* in the process of sinking, but now adrift on the raft, where minutes felt like hours, he wondered if they'd have another disagreement. His ship might be at the bottom of the ocean, but he was still the captain.

- - - -

Sonny, his father, Mr. Conyey and the Captain drifted on the ocean for several

more hours. For several of those hours seven six-foot sharks circled the raft, coming so close as to brush against Ray's legs. When all hope seemed lost a Coast Guard PBY airplane spotted them at dusk. The pilot alerted a shrimp boat which rescued the foursome. The U-boat that sunk the Heredia, sent seven ships to the bottom of the sea in the Gulf of Mexico, before running low on fuel and crossing the Atlantic to return to its base in Nazi Occupied France.

(Co-authored by NY Times bestselling author Michael J. Tougias, this article was based on his new book *So Close to Home*. The book tells the story of all four members of the Downs family as they struggle for survival after a U-boat 506 sank their ship. Their story is contrasted against that of the daring U-boat commander, Erich Wurdemann, who pushed his crew to the limit of endurance as he laid waste to ship's throughout the Gulf. To see photos related to the story and an interview with Sonny Downs visit www.michaeltougias.com)