



## Case Studies



### **SURVIVOR STORY: THE REALIST**

Steve Callahan's life raft came with a 40-day warranty. Adrift in the Atlantic Ocean after his sailboat had sunk in a gale, he discovered this twisted fact while reading the instruction manual. The directions also noted that the tube-patching glue needed to be dry when it was used. The absurdity made him laugh. Here he was in the most desolate waters of the Atlantic. Bobbing in a five-and-a-half-foot life raft, he was 800 miles west of the Canary Islands, 450 miles north of the Cape Verde Islands, and 450 miles east of the nearest shipping lanes. "Who are these jokers that come up with this stuff?" he wondered.

On February 4, 1982, Steve had been asleep in the Napoleon Solo, the small cruiser that he had lovingly built with his own hands. He had hammered every nail, turned every screw, and sanded every grain of wood on the 21-foot vessel. He was cruising solo across the Atlantic from El Hierro in the Canaries to Antigua in the Caribbean. In the middle of the night, he heard a deafening explosion and saw water rushing in. Scrambling from his bunk, he knew the sailboat was going down. "There wasn't a nanosecond of hesitation on my part," he tells me. "It's either you act right then or you're gone."

In the first terrifying moments in the life raft, buffeted by wind and waves, Steve knew to fight blind panic. "I do not want the power from my pumping adrenalin to lead to confused and counterproductive activity," he wrote in his remarkable memoir *Adrift*, one of the greatest survival stories ever told. "I fight the urge to fall into catatonic hysteria: I do not want to sit frozen in fear until the end comes. Focus, I tell myself. Focus and get moving."

An experienced outdoorsman who learned to sail at the age of 12, he quickly assessed his situation. He had three pounds of food, eight pints of water, and a solar still to purify seawater. Steve knew the greatest stories of ocean survival and how long others had managed to stay alive in similar circumstances. In 1972, for instance, the Robertson family of four adults and two children drifted in the Pacific Ocean for 38 days after their schooner *Lucette* was sunk by a pod of whales near the Galapagos Islands. They survived first in a rubber raft and then a fiberglass dinghy. In 1973 off the coast of Guatemala, Maurice and Maralyn Bailey spent 117 days adrift in inflatable rafts after a whale capsized their yacht *Auralyn*. And a Chinese seaman named Poon Lim endured 133 days on a wooden raft in the South Atlantic after his merchant ship, the *Ben Lomond*, was torpedoed by a Nazi submarine in 1942.

Steve worried about his rubber raft that undulated like a waterbed on the ocean. He figured he might last 15 days or so. On the second day, he celebrated his 30th birthday by opening a tin of peanuts and imagining his epitaph:

**STEVEN CALLAHAN**

**FEBRUARY 6, 1952      FEBRUARY 6, 1982**

**DREAMED  
DREW PICTURES  
BUILT BOATS  
DIED**

Then he got to work coping with his new reality. “If I had sat around and... just really denied what was going on, I wouldn’t have survived,” he says. “I needed to be active from square one.” Despair wouldn’t help. To survive, he needed to accept reality and go with the flow of the currents sweeping him westward across the Atlantic toward the Caribbean.

After a few days, he actually began to imagine this journey with as much excitement and wonder as his initial voyage. This was an adventure too, he thought. So he named the raft Rubber Ducky III and set about making an improvised fishing spear to catch food. Just take this step, that step, he told himself, and treat the whole thing not as a disaster, but instead as a continuation of the voyage on a slightly smaller, slightly more humble craft than what you had before.

Changing your attitude isn’t very easy, Steve admits. “It takes a long time because whenever you enter a survival experience, all the rules of your old life are gone away. It takes you a long time to figure out a new life. You’re starting from scratch again. And you see that over and over again whenever you read or hear about survival stories, whether it’s an individual or a group. For a group it’s like starting a whole little society all over again from scratch and for an individual, it’s creating your own life.”

So Steve created a new life. He came up with a small exercise routine from modified yoga poses. He would bend, twist and stretch, and he kept a daily log of his activities and accomplishments. He completed a set of daily chores like cleaning the boat and repairing tears in the rubber. Just keep voyaging, he told himself, and do the best you can, and you’ll see where you go. The journey wasn’t easy. He fought off sharks and went through some very dark and bleak times. But no matter the adversity, he remained realistic. “You take one step,” he says. “You divide things up into achievable steps.”

With a degree in philosophy from Syracuse University, Steve’s mind was filled with deep thoughts. When he wasn’t fishing or making water with a solar still, he passed his time pondering how he could have lived his life differently up to that point; how he hadn’t been a good enough person; how he didn’t understand the true meaning of life. Many people might have freaked out on the raft, but Steve says he actually savored this time to think. He found himself in awe of the ocean and even adopted a school of Dorado, also known as Mahi-Mahi, that followed him for weeks. Over time, he began to see his situation as an opportunity to find a deeper appreciation of life and nature.

After drifting for 76 days, Steve was rescued by fishermen from Guadeloupe, the archipelago in the eastern Caribbean. He had collected plenty of water and food on his tiny raft and had traveled more than 1,800 miles. While thrilled to be rescued, he encouraged the fishermen to finish their work before bringing him back to land. When he finally bid farewell to the Rubber Ducky III, it had outlasted its 40-day warranty by 36 days.

### **ADAPTABILITY IN ACTION: A TRUE STORY**

When Cameron Clapp was 15, he just wanted to get drunk with his friends. He and his twin brother Jesse called themselves thrill seekers and party animals. “We didn’t think there was anything wrong with it,” he says. “It was just how we had fun.” On Friday, September 15, 2001, Cameron drank too much and crossed the street in front of his mother’s house in Pismo Beach. America was still reeling from the 9/11 attacks just a few days earlier, and Cameron headed for the train tracks that cut through the town on California’s central coast known for its long sandy beaches. Cameron sat down on the metal rails and thought about all those people who had lost their lives. It was 3 a.m., and the air was still and quiet. About 10 minutes later, a freight train came roaring through the self-proclaimed Clam Capital of the World, but Cameron was drunk and had passed out. He didn’t hear the train or see its giant headlights. The conductor spotted the boy, a speck in his path, but it was too late. The train’s wheels severed his legs and right

arm instantly.

Cameron doesn't remember a thing until he woke up in Sierra Vista hospital. "I'm 15-years old," he recalls thinking. "I don't have any legs above the knees, my right arm is gone almost to the shoulder." His only thought was: "You're worthless. What are you going to do now?" Over the next three weeks, Cameron says he only felt depressed for a few moments. His main goal was trying to figure out how his new reality. "If I'm confronted with a problematic issue," he says, "I look at it from all angles, from every view I can think of, even if I disagree with them and I resolve the issues."

In the hospital, he thought, "I want to get whatever there is available for people like me and try it." When his first doctor wasn't optimistic about prosthetic limbs and encouraged him to stick with a wheelchair, Cameron refused to listen. He and his mother came up with a motto that they repeat often: "Impossible is an opinion. It's not a fact." So they found new doctors who fitted him with prosthetics that he called "shorties" because they barely lifted him off the ground. Cameron wanted to be as tall as he used to be, like his brother, but he understood that he needed to practice with the short limbs to gain balance and strength. After three-and-a-half months, Cameron worked his way up to longer legs. Within nine months, he started running again. At first, he'd go 100 yards and sit down. Then he'd try another 50 yards and rest. It was hard work, but today, he's a competitive runner, swimmer and recently started playing golf. "I realized it's not what happens to you that matters most," he says, "it's what you do about it."

"I'm a person who can really adapt to my surroundings," Cameron says. In Pismo Beach today, you're likely to see him whipping around on his skateboard. You'd never know he lost three limbs one night in September 2001.

### **RESILIENCE IN ACTION: A TRUE STORY**

Crystal McGraw was one of the rare kids who loved going to the dentist. She was intrigued by the metal tools and even loved the sound of the drill. She was never afraid when the dentist tipped her back and told her to open wide. From the time she was a child, she knew she wanted to become a dental hygienist. If only she had known how hard it would be to fulfill her dream.

On St. Patrick's Day in 1996 at the age of 20, Crystal survived a head-on collision just outside of Duluth, Minnesota. She was thrown from a Camaro and landed on a six-foot fence. A metal post pierced her body. Her left leg was nearly torn off and her ankle was broken. She shattered her pelvis, lost 12 units of blood, and her ear was ripped off. For nine days, she clung to life in a coma. Her neck had been sliced by a broken window and the cut had come within seven hair widths of her jugular vein.

Crystal went through 32 operations in just one month. She was told it would take her ages to be able to walk again or go to the bathroom. But Crystal is stubborn and resilient. She decided she'd walk even with metal bars and plates holding her lower body together. It was agonizing and the tears streamed down her face. "I had a very strong will," she says.

Crystal comes from a small town of 804 people in South Dakota. After surviving the crash, she went through more tough times. She enrolled at Lake Superior College to pursue her studies and attended class wearing a catheter. When she was sexually harassed by another student, she spent hours dealing with school administrators. Then her mother went through emergency bypass surgery and one of her brothers, with whom she was quite close, died unexpectedly of a heart attack.

Just when life seemed to calm down in January 2005, Crystal and her longtime boyfriend Michael went ice fishing near their home in Duluth. When he went back to grab lunch, their house was in flames. The fire had started in the chimney and spread rapidly. The home burned to the ground. "Everything I did have was gone," says Crystal. "You don't know where to start and what to do."

Is all of this too much for one person to take? Crystal says no. "Never ever thought that at all," she says. "What am I going to?" She has a strong religious faith, a positive attitude and resilience. "My strength is positiveness," she explains. And so she carries on, with the belief that things will work out in the end. When Crystal sifted through the ashes of her home, she discovered a surprise that hadn't been consumed by the flames. "I came across my baby teeth," she says. Obsessed with dentistry, she had saved every one. Holding them in her hands, she marveled that they were still pearly white. Crystal figured they were a sign from above to persevere and chase her childhood dream. Today, she is a full-time undergraduate student in the pre-dental program at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. A member of a Sioux tribe, she plans to spend a few years working on the Native American reservation in Sisseton, South Dakota, where she grew up before going into private practice. "I've had many, many setbacks," Crystal says. "But I keep lugging forward. It's just who I am."

### **INSTINCT IN ACTION: A TRUE STORY**

When Randy Brooks' plane crashed into Lake Powell in Utah, he scrambled from the cockpit, climbed over the wing and then slid into the water. "Instinct took over," he says. Randy has been a big game hunter for years. He had stalked Africa's most massive and elusive beasts and he knew that if one of them ever charged at him, instinct was the key to survival.

Now, in the cold Utah afternoon, he felt the impulse to swim to shore with the wind behind him. He could tell it was blowing from the north and so he decided to swim to the southeast. The breeze would give him an extra nudge – and perhaps save his life. In the water, he checked to see how his brother Leslie and Rulon Gardner were doing. It was clear that Rulon wasn't a good swimmer, and so he helped him take off his coat. Then the three began paddling to shore. The water was 44 degrees, and he knew they wouldn't last very long. But he forced all negative thoughts from his mind and focused on his wife and the new plane he would buy when this was all over.

"Live every day like it's your last, but plan for tomorrow." That's Randy's motto. As his feet went numb and his hands started to sting from the cold water, he made himself think positive thoughts. He imagined he was hunting sheep – one of his favorite pursuits. Ahead, he could see that Leslie had made it to shore. But Randy was struggling. His dog paddle wasn't working very well. His head slipped under water and he took in a few gulps that burned his lungs. He was starting to sink.

Suddenly, a vision came to him. Randy thought back to a day in Africa. Big game hunting is as much about shooting and killing as it is about an awareness of your surroundings. Wild beasts can attack at any moment. On that day, a lioness about 35 yards away jumped from the brush and lunged straight at Randy. His instinct told him to wait until the animal was close enough to kill her with one shot. If he missed, he would never have a chance to reload. He'd be dead. As the lioness bounded toward Randy, he waited until she was just five yards away and then he fired. "I was imagining her will to kill me. I could feel her breathing. I could hear her deep breath." He remembered "the vapors out of her mouth." The single shot stopped her. Randy lived; the animal died.

In the lake, as he sank further under water, Randy summoned the power of the lioness. He gave it his all, lunged for the sky, spitting water and violently shaking his head. Then he roared, letting loose a deep, guttural sound. With his last reserves of energy, Randy pushed toward the shore. As he stumbled out of the water, his brother Leslie tackled him. He shoved him to the ground and lay on top of him to warm him up. They looked out into the lake and saw Rulon clinging to a buoy, catching his breath.

"I rely on my instincts every day," Randy says. "When it's a life or death situation, if you let your instinct kick in, you will survive."

