

# **THE DAY MY LIFE WAS SAVED**

**by**

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Nothing tastes as bad as the Indian Ocean. Not turpentine. Not rotten eggs. Not sulfur. And certainly not soap, cod-liver oil or mud! Especially not when you are in the middle of it, swallowing and choking on heaps of it, and it is mercilessly drowning you. The Indian Ocean.

And that's where I was, although not really in the middle of it, but only a few miles out from shore, off the coast of Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1974. Thrashing wildly to breathe and stay afloat and fighting desperately for my life. And slowly, inexorably...drowning in the beautiful, sunlit waves of an inhospitable Indian Ocean.

The first surge of stomach cramps struck suddenly and without warning. A second later the first huge wave of surf hit and I was immediately knocked senseless and sent spiraling to the depths below. But I quickly resurfaced and was ready to do battle with this monstrous element. For I was young and in the prime of health and physical condition. And being young and equally cocky, I was indomitable, indestructible and scared of nothing. Besides, the ocean and I had always been friends and stalwart companions during the time I lived and worked in Mogadishu, Somalia. For I was also an U.S. Marine, and I was the toughest young jarhead on the planet!

Serving on Marine Security Guard Duty in East Africa, I was one of a group of young marines assigned to protect the United States Embassy in the capital of Somalia's tiny, poverty-stricken nation. This was many years before that poor country made headlines and saw other young Americans embattled and struggling for their lives there. It was a time when there was still infrastructure, civil order, a centralized government, numerous businesses and even occasional tourists. There were even friendly night-spots to wine, dine and dance the humid evenings away. As well as a fair number of Italian farmers, Western diplomats, and Americans and Europeans of various business interests and occupations with whom to socialize and enjoy the year-long sunny, sandy Indian Ocean beaches.

But there were no sunny sandy beaches nor friendly tourists for me this dark bright morning. And no person three miles away on shore--even with a good set of binoculars--who would spot me writhing and fitfully drowning in the sea. Nor were there any other nearby swimmers or sea vessels in the area to come to my aid. I was completely without the possibility of human assistance or rescue. And utterly, totally alone.

Mere seconds had elapsed after resurfacing. Then, with barely time to take a breath, another swell, larger than the first, appeared from nowhere and forced me to re-submerge. At the same time, another wave of cramps – this one also worse than before – came over me. As I was sent choking below the surface, I felt my body grow slack and begin to lose what I had always assumed was a boundless strength and vitality.

My predicament was far more serious than I had thought. It was now dire and terrifying. What had become of my indomitable vigor? Where was my limitless strength, youthful indestructibility and the carefree attitude I held towards the once puny sea? Other thoughts pervaded my confused, groping mind: why did I swim out here? What had I been trying to prove again? My effortless strength as a swimmer and ability to merge as one with the ocean? And why, in God's name, had I consumed a large meal before swimming miles out to take on the tireless sea?

A whole minute passed since resurfacing yet once more. Somehow and mercifully, another swell failed to roll in and punish me. So, with exhaustive effort, I was able to reposition myself and start for shore. I laid face forward and flat upon my stomach and, with only cupped hands, was able now to propel my listless hulk from the persistent danger looming behind.

But the shore seemed a line on the horizon, and I wasn't even sure if it were still there. Far worse were the cramps now swathing my entire body and draining what little strength I yet had. The sea which was usually comfortably warm this time of day now felt frigid and tightening, and I was fast losing sensation in my limbs. After a few strides, a strange depression seized me and suddenly I felt certain I would not make it back to shore. Apparently, I believed I was no longer drowning, but was about to drown.

Then, and again without warning, yet another wave slammed against me; and with even greater weight and force. I was sent below the sea's glaring surface a third time, and went choking and retching on the brine I had already swallowed, and began vomiting more of the large meal I consumed earlier in the day. But I was also struggling not to gasp for air while submerged. For I had only exhaled a tiny breath before being forced to submerge once more.

What seemed like hours were only seconds this time submerged. But such was the time I had to reflect on my young, short-lived life, on what little I had accomplished and all that I still had left to do. Before drowning. Before becoming lifeless and innate. Before being swallowed whole by the Indian Ocean.

But indeed, they were only seconds, and there was not much of anything significant I had to reflect upon, except the sudden realization that I wasn't an atheist and did believe in God. And that now would be a good time to pray!

But I had no time to pray. No time left to reflect further upon my brief, uneventful life. Let alone time to ask of the God whom I seldom prayed to, for divine intervention. I was drowning, almost drowned, and about to die. I had swallowed a sea of saltwater and despair, and was

physically depleted and spiritually drained. So I was listless to hope and loathed to think one further thought or offer up a single prayer...even if I could.

Then, unexpectedly and not knowing how, I was once more above the surface, coughing up sea and gasping for air. But I was barely afloat, and unable to move a single muscle or fiber of my being. The end would come any second now, and why it hadn't already, was beyond all human understanding. Then ultimate despair turned into ultimate terror: out at sea, not more than 70 or 80 yards distant, another wave of unbelievable size was heading directly towards me. And at a hurtling pace! It was at this moment I heard The Voice.

But no, it was more than a voice. Gentle in tone, and powerful and confident in inflection, it was at the same time a soothing whisper and a mighty clarion: both comforting and commanding. It said, "Relax, let go of yourself. And fall back upon the waves and lie still. I will save you."

I did as I was told and let go of myself completely and ceased further exertion. Suddenly, I found myself on my back, stretched-out and calmly floating upon the tossing water. Then the tide--of momentous size and girth--loomed above me...but only for a second. The next instant I was riding its crest and being ferried towards shore.

During this not unpleasant ride to shore, I had a sensation of floating on a cushion of air or reclining in a soft bed of flowers. Overhead, all I could see was a perfect-looking noonday sun smiling back at me, as well as a few scattered, friendly-looking clouds. But in my mind all I heard and kept hearing was the Voice that spoke to me. It's firm, soft-sounding words and nothing more. And this until I was let go of the wave and crawled the rest of the distance to shore, where I sprawled for an unknown period until my strength and senses returned to me.

This was over thirty years ago, and much has happened in my life since then, some things bad and many things good. And though I have no physical proof of the event – no video or photos or tape recordings or eye witnesses, and sometimes even forget that it actually happened (as I often forget to be a prayerful person), I know that it did. Especially on lovely sunlit days and whenever I am near the ocean. I also know that it was real and really happened because, you see, I did not drown and am still alive. Someone or something spoke to me in angelic tones one day when I was drowning in the distasteful Indian Ocean. It told me that I would be saved. And I was.