

*George Balazs*



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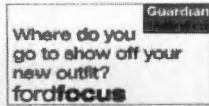
## Sailor survives after four months adrift

Sailor survives on seagull and turtle during four months adrift at sea *11*

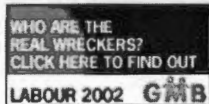
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**Duncan Campbell in Los Angeles**  
Thursday September 26, 2002  
[The Guardian](#)

A lone sailor has been rescued after drifting in the Pacific ocean for four months with a broken mast in a survival story being likened to that of Robinson Crusoe. The man, a Vietnamese immigrant, survived by living on seagull, turtle and rainwater.



Richard Van Pham, 62, told rescuers that he set off on his 26-foot boat, the Sea Breeze, from Long Beach in southern California to make the 25-mile trip to Catalina island, a popular day out for local sailors.



But he ran into a storm which had snapped his mast, he said. After his radio and outboard motor also broke down, he found the boat drifting south.

When he was rescued by the US Navy on

September 17, Mr Pham had drifted 300 miles south-west of the coast of Costa Rica. By this time he had been at sea for four months, he said.

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Mr Pham, who came to the US as an immigrant in 1976, had been living in his boat in a berth off Long Beach at the time of his trip.

A single man with no family, he had not told friends of his plans and so no alarm was raised when he failed to return after a planned day trip.

With only enough food for a day, he had to use survival skills to stay alive.

He collected rainwater in a five-gallon bucket and caught what fish he could. He nailed some of the fish to the boat to trap seabirds which he roasted on a fire made from panelling ripped from the side of the boat. He trapped a sea turtle and then used salt from sea water to preserve it for days when he had caught no fish.

Staying under cover for most of the day to save himself from a blazing summer sun, he did have some entertainment: his solar-powered generator sometimes gave him enough power to operate his television so that he could watch videos he had on board.

But he had lost 40 lbs from an already slim frame when he was finally seen by a US Customs drugs spotting plane flying off the Costa Rica coast.

They alerted the US Navy and the USS McClusky, a guided missile frigate, investigated.

They were greeted by the sight of a lone sailor waving at them frantically.

"I see nothing," Mr Pham told the Los Angeles Times of his ordeal. "Then one day I see a plane.

"I know I'm close to people. They tip their wings to say hello. Two hours later a ship comes to my boat, I am very, very happy."

The McClusky initially addressed him in Spanish but he responded in broken English.

He said he did not need medical treatment and merely asked the crew to help him fix his mast. After he had been persuaded that the boat was in such bad condition that it was not worth saving, Mr Pham reluctantly allowed the navy crew to sink it, going below deck so that he did not have to watch the boat being set on fire. He then travelled with the McClusky to Guatemala. The crew had a whipround on board to raise enough money for his \$800 (£510) plane fare back to the US.

"The crew really adopted him," said a navy

spokesman. "I think he's a very special man."

Captain Terry Bragg, the commander of Destroyer Squadron One in San Diego which oversees the McClusky, said: "It's a three-hour cruise gone bad. It's like cross between Gilligan's Island and Robinson Crusoe."

Mr Pham's adventure was not over when he reached LA international airport.

In these times of heightened security, the immigration authorities detained him so that they could check whether his papers were in order.

He was finally allowed back into the US - but his home is now at the bottom of the Pacific.

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## Top Stories - USA TODAY

### Sailor tells 'phenomenal story of survival'

Thu Sep 26, 9:16 AM ET

Martin Kasindorf *USA TODAY*

LOS ANGELES -- Though he's homeless and 40 pounds lighter, Richard Van Pham is grateful to be safely on land after three months adrift and alone in a disabled sailboat.

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After a 3,000-mile saga of endurance in the Pacific, Pham, 62, thanked God and the U.S. Navy ([news - web sites](#)) for rescuing him off Central America. Rescuers credited a third factor for Pham's good fortune: the unflagging ingenuity with which he managed to live on rainwater, sea turtles, fish and birds.

"A phenomenal story of survival," Navy Capt. Terry Bragg, commander of the San Diego-based squadron that made the rescue, told the Associated Press.

Pham, who immigrated to the USA from Vietnam in 1976, returned to Los Angeles on Tuesday. A local charity took him in tow Wednesday and is trying to find him a home.

Pham, a retiree, was living aboard his rickety, 26-foot sloop, Sea Breeze, when he set out in mid-June from a marina in nearby Long Beach for a 25-mile day cruise to Santa Catalina Island.

A storm came up. Heavy winds broke his mast. His outboard motor and two-way radio failed. The boat drifted southward through lonely weeks that were "like a cross between *Gilligan's Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*," Bragg told the *Los Angeles Times*.

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"This was not exactly a Class A boat, and it was definitely not an oceangoing vessel," Navy Lt. Cmdr. Barry Walsh said.

A man without a family, Pham had told no one where he was going. Nobody reported him missing. On Sept. 17, a Navy plane on anti-drug patrol spotted the derelict boat 275 miles off Costa Rica. The Navy frigate McClusky plucked Pham from his deck 90 minutes later. At the time, he was grilling a sea gull.

Pham said he had clubbed the friendly gulls perched on the bow when he couldn't catch fish or his favorite food, turtles. "The birds taste not too good," Pham told Los Angeles' KCRS-TV.

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He told rescuers that he had fastened leftover chunks of fish and turtle to the mast to attract birds. He caught rainwater in a 5-gallon bucket.

The drifting boat carried him west of coastal shipping lanes. Pham reported seeing only one ship, too far away to hail, before the plane appeared and dipped its wings to indicate it would send help.

"When I see ship, happy," he told reporters. "God saved me, so I'm here."

Navy officers said that aside from the lost weight, Pham was in good condition. He asked for a new sail and help in repairing the mast so he could sail Sea Breeze to the nearest land -- Hawaii, he thought.

When inspection showed the boat was not seaworthy, Pham reluctantly agreed to let the Navy sink it. First, he retrieved his "green card," proof of legal U.S. residence.

Pham "bonded with the crew" for five days until the McClusky dropped him off at a port in Guatemala, Walsh said. The crew collected \$800 to buy him an airline ticket to Los Angeles. State Department and immigration officials readmitted him after questioning him briefly.

Grueling as it was, Pham's three-month ordeal did not break the record for drifting alone at sea. That mark belongs to Poon Lim, a Chinese-born seaman on a British merchant ship that was torpedoed by a German U-boat in the South Atlantic in 1943. A Portuguese fishing boat rescued him from a raft 133 days later.

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