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Family vowed not to eat each other while left stranded in the ocean for 38 days

Story by Liam McNerney • 1w • 5 min read



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The Robertson family in Jamaica
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Douglas Robertson was just 16 when he and his family became stranded in the Pacific Ocean for over a month, and he has now revealed the three solemn vows they made - including a pledge not to resort to cannibalism. Retired merchant navy officer Dougal Robertson and his wife Linda had been sailing around the world with their children when disaster nearly claimed their lives in 1972.



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The ordeal began when three killer whales attacked their vessel, leaving the terrified family from Staffordshire stranded on a small dinghy for more than a month. They were ultimately rescued by a [Japanese](#) fishing boat, and Douglas has since spoken about his recollections of the harrowing experience.

Recounting the vows his family made shortly after their boat sank, he disclosed: "The first oath that we made was that we would look for a rescue ship. We would stand watch 24/7 and look for the rescue ship. The second oath that we made was that we would not eat each other under any circumstances. We would die quietly together as a family and not eat each other. The third and final oath that we made to each other was that we would try and stay alive."

The extraordinary adventure began on January 27, 1971, when the family departed from Falmouth in Cornwall, aboard a 43ft wooden schooner called The Lucette, which they had purchased after selling their family farm. The family spent over a year navigating the Atlantic Ocean, stopping at numerous Caribbean ports along the way.

Yet 17 months into their voyage, killer whales struck as the vessel approached the Galapagos Islands. By this point, Douglas's sister had remained in Miami after falling in love, leaving him aboard with his parents and two brothers.



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 Douglas Robertson
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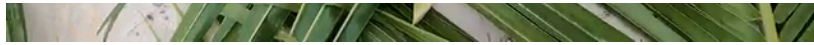
Speaking to [OMG Stories](#), Douglas recalled: "Something caught my eye over on the starboard bow. It was a shape. You can tell the differences in shapes between seabirds and more solid things quite easily once you get used to it. I knew it wasn't a bird. It disappeared and I thought nothing more of it until a few seconds later, bang, bang, bang, we were struck."

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He continued: "The boat was lifted bodily out of the water. If you can imagine breaking a tree trunk in half across your knee, that sound that might make, it sort of invaded your body, the sound did. And I knew that was serious. Something serious must have happened."

Douglas rushed below deck to locate his father, Dougal, immediately noticing water flooding through the hull. He then heard a surging sound to his left, revealing three killer whales, while his father, now standing in knee-deep water, urgently ordered everyone to abandon the rapidly sinking vessel.

The group scrambled onto an inflatable raft and dinghy, quickly realizing their supplies were critically low. Among their meager provisions were just 18 cans of water shared between six people, including a Welsh statistician who had joined the expedition.



 Douglas with Blue Peter's Valerie Singleton
© New Day

Describing the harrowing initial hours, Douglas recalled: "Night came and we slept in the raft for the first night. It was pretty horrible. You know, it was water. It was getting wet. Life is so cruel to you. You know, we had these hallucinatory dreams of banquets, big motor yachts that we'd seen and that we were actually on them only to wake up and find that we were in the raft."



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On the second day, Douglas spotted a turtle floating in the water, having previously read a fiction novel about wartime survivors who captured turtles and consumed their blood. His father initially resisted the idea, but by the sixth day, when the group was desperately hungry, they killed their first turtle.

Despite the life-threatening circumstances, Douglas also recalled with affection: "Some of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen have been on that raft. Sunsets and deep into the blue, pacific blue, with all the fish swimming like you were in there swimming with them."

After 16 days, the raft became unusable and the six individuals were forced to squeeze into a dinghy measuring only 10ft in length. More weeks passed until, on the 38th day, a vessel appeared on the horizon and they fired their last two flares to signal for help.

The date was July 23, 1972, when the Japanese fishing trawler, the Toka Maru II, came to their rescue. Douglas recalled: "I'll always remember the Japanese coming alongside throwing this dirty rope, oil stained rope across the dinghy and I grabbed hold of it and I held this rope. I held it tight and they pulled us alongside. Our ordeal was over. We'd been 38 days adrift on this dinghy and raft. We'd sailed 750 miles across the Pacific Ocean. We were all alive, believe it or not.

"We checked our position with the Japanese ship. We were 260 miles off the Costa Rica coast. Another six days we would have made it to land."



— The survivors
© New Day

In 2024, Douglas traveled to Japan and tracked down the vessel's captain, then aged 88, to personally express his gratitude for the life-saving rescue.

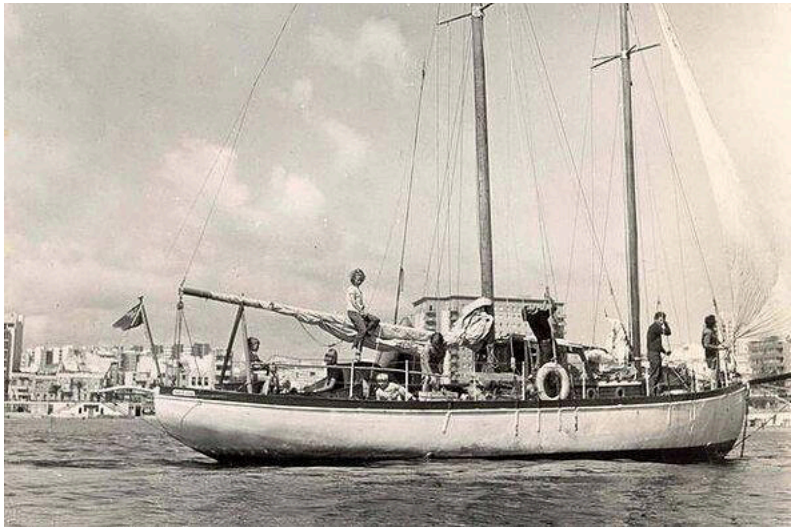
His father subsequently authored a best-selling book titled *Survive the Savage Sea*, while Douglas pursued a career as an accountant in Barnet. He laughed: "I'm very happy to not be so adventurous anymore."



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Reflecting on his family, he shared: "We've had our moments, but we all know we all know deep down we survived a great adventure together. My dad, my mum, could never forgive themselves for what they'd put us through. I kept saying to them, 'Look, we lived. Mum, you cared for us.' And they said, 'Well, we should never have done it.'"



The Lucette
© New Day

"And the long and the short of it is they didn't stay together. They got divorced. Dougal followed his book writing career. And my mum bought a farm in the midlands."

Douglas' family has since expanded, and he now has 17 grandchildren. He disclosed that 43 individuals are living today because the Japanese vessel rescued them.

Regarding his most vivid recollection of being adrift at sea for such an extended period, he concluded: "The one thing that sits with me, remains with me, is the blueness of the ocean. We were so close to it. We were part of it."

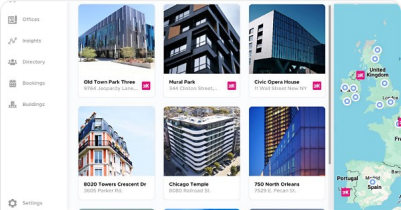
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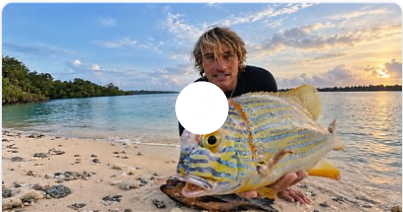
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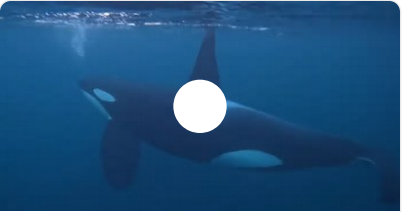
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Story by Sabrina Fernandez • 6d





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We like to think we're tough enough to survive in any situation, or that we can handle anything life throws at us, which can be true depending on what you think of as a challenge.

Because most people think they've survived a war after having to deal with a clogged toilet or having to change a tire, but surprise! That's not the worst thing that could happen to you.

The people in these stories went through things no one should ever have to go through, and they didn't just get by but fought to survive these terrifying real-life events you wouldn't wish to be caught up in.

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