

Rescued

So, there I was again. Alone, stuck in the middle of nowhere, with everybody else in the right place, apart from me obviously. How, oh how, do I keep getting myself into these positions?

This story takes place in the little port town of Porthcawl, just south of the Swansea harbour and the mighty impressive pollution factories that are Port Talbot. The time of day was about two in the afternoon, the sea was relatively calm, and the weather was quite nice, apart from a hefty breeze that was, of course, blowing me in completely the wrong direction. As for me? Well, I was floating out to sea on my little surfboard with nothing around me but open water and cliffs. Situation Normal: All Fucked Up.

Obviously, I didn't perish at sea. Thankfully for me, those fine people at the coastguard, the RNLI and the R.A.F. came to my rescue, deftly plucking me out of the water, giving me a cup of tea and then sending me on my way.

However, that was all after the fact, the extremely odd fact, that one moment I was contemplating my own mortality surrounded by salty solitude and the next I was wandering around the town of Porthcawl looking for a chip shop. The actual event itself was a very terrifying and lonely experience. At the time I was not so concerned with the rescue itself, but rather more with the fact that I was in a position where I had to *be* rescued.

I shall say it now, those people who save such people as myself are damn good at what they do. It is after all their job, or at least one of their jobs. In fact, when I searched around later for the boat crew to give them my thanks, I found out that most of them had gone. Off back to whatever normal Monday routine waited for them. One lady I recall had abandoned her class to save me and was at the time rushing back to her no doubt errant school kids. These real Baywatch stars do not tan themselves in the sun waiting for the latest model to come by but are in fact probably leading far more normal lives somewhere. My unending thanks to them. I might have felt extremely foolish at the time but that is far preferable to the feelings I would have felt had they not come by.

It is hard to say, in my opinion, what would have happened had I not been picked up. On one hand I was probably quite safe, after all I had a wetsuit, a surfboard and the seas were fairly calm. But on the other hand, I may have had a wetsuit, a surfboard and calm seas but nevertheless there I was - swept out of all control and pretty much at the mercy of the sea. When one improbable circumstance has occurred, it is hard to discount the possibility of another one happening. Especially when the results are so final.

Suffice to say I was worried, scared, terrified, knackered, determined, confused, alone, helpless, embarrassed, mortal and last but by no means least *rescued*.

Happy trails and watch out for that rip.

Monday 13th October 1997. Rest Bay, Wales.

I have a hood on, and the surfboard is yellow beneath me. My arms feel like lead and my breaths are loud to my ears. Over to my right I can see the blurred outline of the others. At one point they were so close I thought I could stop paddling. Now they are farther away. I don't know whether it is because they are stronger swimmers than me or if it is the sea that is pushing me away. I risk a glance over my right shoulder behind me, I do not like looking left as it unbalances me, and I dare not risk falling off my board.

Fuck. Those rocks have not moved. I am paddling parallel to the coast trying vainly to get forwards, it is so damn near, yet I can't make it. All I have to do is go fifty yards or so and I'll be OK. The rest will be easy. I redouble my efforts; my thoughts turn to heroic stories in books about unbeatable men who turn the waves by willpower alone. My leaden arms cannot do it. Again, pound, pound, pound. Stroke, stroke, stroke. I think of nothing but the swim. This is no time for fanciful musings, just get back in and swim goddammit.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I use the power of the expletives and call them to my arms. I glance up. My friends are even farther away. I shout. It does not even seem loud enough to my ears. Damn, I can't believe this is happening. Shit. My thoughts turn to panic. Mikey, don't leave me. Zid, get yourself out of this mess. Stroke, stroke, stroke. Surely, I must nearly be there now. I look to my right, searching for that crack in the rock. Shit I haven't moved. It is useless, my arms die and I look up helplessly. They are gone.

For a moment or two I stop and consider my alternatives. I am somehow caught in a current and am being pushed away from the beach. I turn the board and face seawards. As far as I can see the coastline is cliff faces. I ponder the possibility. The only way in for me now is onto those rocks. If I turn right, can I avoid being smashed and clamber onto them? I doubt it. As I watch, a spray of water flies high into the sky. Out here it is quiet, but I do not forget the chaos of what it is like to be caught inside, and with rocks? No thank you.

Plus, what of the board? There is no way I can clamber out with a board attached to my heel. I would have to ditch it. I think not of the buoyancy the board is giving me, but rather more of the cost. It is not mine, dare I do this to Simon, to smash his board up for the sake of my inability to keep up? I wonder, has the situation gotten this serious? I am loath to admit it. Another wave crashes in, the spray looms up larger this time. No way, screw the rocks, I'm not going into that mess, paddle out stay alive and wait for the boys to do something. Wait for someone else to do something? Then I am helpless? I must be *rescued*? Damn, surely not. I turn and paddle again. The fear of failure powering me on.

As I face seawards once more a wave dashes in and clips me across the side of my face, not hard but enough to knock me off the board. I am gone. Underwater I struggle further,

panicking at the feeling of the sea all about me. The backlash of the wave is making fresh eruptions of panic in my brain, I am dragged tumbling through the currents.

I kick to the surface. The board, the one that I was so traitorously considering abandoning, floats upturned near me. Thank God for leashes. Pulling it in I haul myself on it like a sack once more. I am exhausted and the trashing of the wave forces me to stop and breathe. Shit. A wave. Am I drifting in?

Thoughts of failure, embarrassment and all else flee my mind. I cannot afford to be washed in on the rocks. I paddle, paddle, paddle. This time straight out away from those cliffs. Was that a rogue wave, or am I too late? In apprehension I watch as the sea rises before me. Momentarily the horizon is gone, the approaching wave rushing in. If it curls and rises then the situation has gotten worse. Experience tells me that if it knocks me back then so will the next and with each one I will be pushed a little further until the breakers gather strength and then ...

The wave rocks underneath me, lifting me up but nothing else. Thank God. I paddle.

I cannot measure my progress; there are no landmarks around me. I dare not stop and look over my shoulder at the cliff for I dread the loss of momentum. I do not know how long I can keep this up.

At last, I deem myself safe from the breakers. Having given up to the sea I accept that I cannot make it back to the beach now. Jesus, I can't even see it anymore. The crack that so cruelly spoke of my lack of progress is now far away. I am drifting fast. Where the hell am I going? I turn and look over my left shoulder. Oh shit. Fucking great, a headland of cliff. It looks like the rip will take me around it, but I cannot be sure. For fuck's sake, I tell myself, this can't be happening.

Once more my arms slap into the water. I feel so helpless, I know my strokes are poor, more flailing in the water than anything else. From time to time, I slip off my board and kick with my legs, hoping to give my arms some rest. It is little help.

Where are the others? I look back to the beach but remember I cannot see it anymore. Calm. Be calm, I tell myself. I remember a conversation with Ian I had yesterday about panic, about the sea, about this very situation. My greatest fear of the sea, being swept away. Panic is the main enemy. But I also remember the newspaper I read in the morning with the stories of all the Darwin awards, of the countless people who have died in manners that we as survivors now find amusing. For all those rescued at sea, there are those who have died, and none of them wanted to. Is this what they felt like?

Seawards again I paddle, putting the sight of land behind me, with rocks barring my way it is a cruel torment, and I have no wish to look at it anymore. For some reason the sight of open water is more welcoming to me right now. With my head just inches above the

sea I feel alone. I think of Mikey. How long will it take them to realize where I am? Half an hour? More? Less? I tell myself half an hour. I can stay alive for half an hour surely?

Suddenly the thought is there again in my head. Death. No, surely not. But then again what of those others? None of them went out expecting to die and history shows that they did. Would I become another tragedy of the day? A headline mixed with all the others? No. Yes. No. I look at the sea all around me. All I have to do is fall off and sink underneath this watery skin and then it is all over ...and I am gone. A wave washes in. For fuck's sake no. I.. am ..not.. ready.. to.. *die*.

Alone in the unending sea I fight it as hard and futilely as I can. Stroke, for fuck's sake, stroke. Memories, no, not memories, images of things I have not yet done float before me, there must be more time. There is so much to live for. Now that I am committed to my survival I turn and scan the cliff tops. There I see a figure walking a dog. I shout. He does nothing. I shout again. I wave my arms. Is he looking at me? I can't tell. Screaming and shouting I lower my pride to beg for help. Will this man, this human, this member of my species turn and hear me? The dog runs over the hill and soon the dark coated man is gone.

Fuck.

Half an hour. I give Mikey half an hour and for fuck's sake that will do. The headland to my left is now close enough to be a worry. So once again I succumb to the paddle and think of nothing else, each raising of my arms has weights added to it.

After what seems an age, I turn. There! Another person, and another! I shout. I yell. I scream. Wave. wave. wave. Can they see me? One of the figures departs rapidly heading leftwards. Have they seen me? Is that good? But if so, why are the others still walking about so slowly? Perhaps they forgot something in their car and were just running back for it? Perhaps they are just talking? For fuck's sake. I look to the headland, but I am out of its reach. Now a larger crowd has gathered, I cannot see their faces. I wave frantically. Please, I beg, see me, see me, see me. For fuck's sake wave back and let me know you have seen me.

The group stands and more numbers add to it. Shit. I force myself to believe that they have seen me, they can't all be friends and talking together. Instinct kicks in and I ask myself why don't they call the coastguard? The coastguard? Has it come to that? Despite my mess I laugh to myself, fucking asshole....

One bang. Two bangs.

What the hell was that? I hate not being able to see. I turn and paddle seawards again. Running the sounds in my head. No doubt those were signal flares for me. But there is doubt. I dare not afford myself the luxury of comfort, of doing nothing, just in case. Two

bangs akin to fireworks in the broad light of day, Ziad that must be for you. Just hold on, maybe they need time, I have no idea of how far they must come, how long they need.

Time, I need time. The seawards slog continues. Out, away from the cliffs. Suddenly I look up, squinting against the bright sunlight. There! A marvellous apparition appears in the sky before me. I cannot help but sag in relief and then hang my head in shame. I bang my head softly against the yellow surfboard in embarrassment. They've sent a helicopter for me.

I stop the self-abuse and look upwards, the yellow helicopter is thunderous above me, and I raise my right arm in salute. I can see the radio man in the back well enough, and it comes to a stationary hover some twenty feet above me, to my left. What will happen I wonder? Will they lower a rope? Will a diver jump out? Or will they land? Surely not. Unknowing of their intention but assuming that the closer I am the better, I paddle towards them.

There is a noise over my left shoulder. An engine getting louder. It is a lifeboat rib, and hanging over the side are three people, wide smiles on their faces greet me. Their arms are outstretched. I fall gratefully into their waiting grip.

It takes but a few moments to sort me out. I am given a life jacket, the board is stashed away, and friendly faces wash away any thoughts of embarrassment. Together we give a wave to the helicopter before the boat turns and roars back out across the sea, no paddling required.

I almost forget. I turn left and wave my arm to the faces on the cliff top.

'Thank you.'