

Shipwrecked for 38 days: the real life family Robertson

It was a tale beyond belief: a family of five, including twin 10-year-old boys, surviving more than a month in the Pacific on a tiny life-raft with almost no food or water.



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By Stephen Adams

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When the Robertson family were picked up after 38 days on board their nine foot long fibreglass boat, the *Ednamair*, more than 200 miles from the Galapagos Islands, they made global headlines.

Now Douglas Robertson, 18 at the time, has given the fullest account ever of their ordeal, which included drinking turtles' blood, developing excruciating sea sores and having to undergo makeshift enemas with polluted water to stop themselves dying of thirst.

Last November the family donated the Ednamair to the National Maritime Museum Cornwall in Falmouth where more than 400,000 people have now seen it.

The Robertsons left the port in January 1971 in a 43ft schooner called the Lucette, on what was little more than a whim, after one of the twins, Neil, asked why they could not sail around the world.

Their adventurous father Dougal, a former mariner, promptly agreed and sold the family's impoverished Staffordshire farm to fund the escape.

They set sail without so much as a test run on the calm Carrick Roads, heading straight into a fierce Atlantic storm.

But that skirmish was minor compared to the ravages they would face.

Seventeen months into their voyage, having successfully crossed the Atlantic, they were struck by a pod of killer whales off the Central American coast.

The freak encounter cracked the Lucette's timber hull, sinking the boat in minutes.

Douglas Robertson, now 55, recalled: "There was a huge splashing noise behind me and I turned around and saw three whales.

"I thought, 'This is how I'm going to die. I'm going to be eaten alive.' "

However, the family, plus a student hitchhiker called Robin Williams, climbed aboard the boat's rubber dinghy.

With enough water for 10 days, a bag of onions, a few oranges and lemons, and some sweets, the six's chances of survival were minimal.

Seventeen days later the inflatable gave out, leaving only the smaller Ednamair between them and the deep blue sea.

Their tiny vessel was so overladen that they had to take turns to sit on the only dry seat, the others submerged to their waists.

Before dying from cancer in 1991, Dougal Robertson wrote an account of how they evaded death, called *Survive the Savage Sea*.

But his son said that, while he admired his father's tough-mindedness, the book ignored the others' contributions.

He said: "In my book I ask, 'What role did we play?' My dad gave us the drive and had the brains, but my mother had the caring aspect, rubbing our sores with turtle oil and even sitting in the water so we could stay dry."

While adrift they killed 13 turtles, using a spear fashioned from a paddle, and even a five foot shark.

Lyn, who had been a nurse, devised a gruesome technique to keep them hydrated with rainwater collected in the boat.

He said she knew the water, which was contaminated by turtle blood and offal, would be poisonous if taken orally, and insisted her family take enemas using tubes from the rung of a ladder.

"If taken rectally, the poison doesn't go through the digestive system," he explained.

On 23 July 1972 they were finally picked up after a Japanese crew spotted their distress flare.

Sadly Lyn and Dougal later divorced, the trauma exposing irreconcilable fault-lines in their relationship. However, she later nursed him for three years before his death.

Mr Robertson, now an accountant for a south London college, said he and his brothers Sandy and Neil were strangely thankful for their shipwreck nightmare.

"If I had known throughout that I was going to be picked up, then I would choose the adventure," he said.

"But when we were on the raft, we thought we were going to die," he added. "It was like sitting there with the sword of Damocles hanging over your head."