



Bandages covering his shark bites, Robert Walker rests in hospital after ordeal.

## 17 HOURS ADRIFT

(Continued)

Just then, the motor coughed to a halt. "Out of gas," I fumed. As the boat lost headway, the billowing swells tossed it sickeningly to and fro. I clambered toward the back of the boat to fill the gas can, struggling to maintain my balance.

As I stumbled down to one knee, the sloshing sound of water told me that we were flooded between the double decks. Before I could right myself, my 225 pounds forced the trapped water to rush to the stern of the boat. I lunged forward toward the bow, but too late. Water gushed in and the stern went under. Jim and I dived into the ocean before we were sucked under and grabbed a line fastened to the bow, which was still afloat.

"It's going to sink, Jim," I yelled. "We'd better get something to hold!"

Everything happened so quickly, we had no chance to grab life vests. We each snatched a bobbing, plastic seat cushion and wrapped our arms around it. As the bow of the boat slipped quietly under the waves, we began to drift apart.

I floated aimlessly all that afternoon. When the sun began to dip beneath the horizon, the first symptoms of panic seized me. I forced myself not to thrash around and exhaust myself. Finally only a few rays of sunlight shimmered over the water. My hopes of being rescued ebbed with the sun.

All that interminable night, I tightly held on to the cushion, frightened as much by the unknowns of the darkness as by the hopelessness of my situation. I knew moments of stark terror when strange sea creatures brushed their scaly bodies against my face. The snatches of moonlight dancing alternately on the crests and hollows of the waves were scant comfort.

This can't be happening to me, I told myself over and over again. This is something that only happens in grade "B" motion pictures.

**S**UDDENLY, as I hovered on the crest of a wave, something glimmered faintly in a fleeting patch of moonlight. Before I could make out what it was, I was gently swept into the trough of the swell. When the next swell lifted me to its peak, a surge of hope spread through my punished body. Not more than 25 feet away, the moon shone softly on a navigation buoy!

My heart began to beat rapidly. I started to swim strongly toward the buoy—and drifted farther away. I'm a good swimmer and five times I mustered my failing strength and started for that buoy. I sobbed as the current defeated me. And then I couldn't even see the buoy any more.

The first gray of dawn comforted me somewhat. Now, at least, I figured, they can see me. Helen must have told the Coast Guard I hadn't come home, and they'll be searching for me. I wondered idly how Jim had made out. Had he been rescued and told them where we had capsized?

I was watching the sun—and renewed hope— inching over the horizon when without warning there was a terrible impact against my right shoulder, and I was sent scudding over the water. As I fought to keep my mouth out of the water, a sleek, menacing body flashed past. It took a few seconds to realize that the intruder was a deadly hammer-head shark, at least seven feet long.

He was probably after other prey, I reasoned, when he didn't turn on me immediately. Maybe I'll be all right, I thought. About 10 minutes later, however, I froze with panic when I saw a fin slicing through the water straight toward me. With terrible fascination, I watched the graceful shark bear down on me. I was nearly in a hypnotic trance, half frightened out of my wits, half intrigued by the precision of the great fish.

And then there was an unbearable pain in my hands and a tremendous wrench as the water closed over my head. I went down, down, it seemed, to the depths of the ocean, while the shark's teeth ripped the flesh from my hand and fastened painfully into the bone.



His strength gone, near death, Walker lapsed into an unconscious state just before the rescuers got to him.

Water poured into my straining lungs. And then I was fighting for my life. I ground my knees into the glistening belly of my tormentor, for the moment oblivious to the pain in my fingers. The startled fish relaxed his grip enough for me to tear my hands loose and claw my way to the surface.

If he had come right back at me, I wouldn't have had a chance. But he circled me warily for what must have been five minutes. Then he made another darting pass!

As the great fin sped through the water, some instinct made me force my mangled hand inside my trouser pocket where it fastened on my jack-knife. I wrenched the blade open with my teeth and curled the paralyzed fingers of my right hand around the handle with my left hand.

As he darted in, I lunged and brought the knife down on his head with all my strength. I cried with pain and despair when the shaft doubled back against my hand. I hadn't been able to penetrate the hard bone of the shark's head!

The shark circled twice more and then, without warning, closed in again. This time I had forced my fingers down over the shaft of the knife, the blade cutting into my fingers, so that the knife couldn't close again.

When he was within a foot of me, I threw myself against his side and the knife dug in. His blood spurted out like a great oil gusher and momentarily blinded me. The knife was forced out of my hand as he slid by.

The wounded shark was crazed. He thrashed the water around me in a frenzy of fright and pain. And then, when I had given up all hope, he high-tailed it off under the water.

**I** LOOKED at my hands. He had chewed away a knuckle and badly mangled two fingers on my right hand. My left hand wasn't as bad, but I was losing blood quickly. The salt water helped to staunch the blood somewhat, though the salt in the open wounds nearly made me pass out from the pain.

I realized I had been mumbling. In my fright, I was praying. "Dear God, don't take me away from my children," I pleaded out loud. "I love them... and they love me. Don't let them grow up without a daddy. I know I don't deserve a chance, but bring me back safely to my family, and I'll live the way I should."

My vocal prayer was short-lived. Attracted by the blood, between eight and ten sharks were milling about in the water a scant six feet from me! They circled ominously, closing in, and then, just as I thought it was the end, they'd widen the radius again.

From time to time, an emboldened shark would swoop in on me for the *coup de grâce*, and then, seemingly thinking better of it, as he got within a foot or two he'd rejoin the circle. When one of them approached me like this, I thrust my head under the water so I could watch him and kicked my feet with the little remaining strength I had—a futile defense against such formidable killers.

It went on like this for five or six hours.

**T**HE NEXT thing I remember, I was being fished out of the water by kindly hands. I regained consciousness only once, when a wave swept over the rescue boat and I asked for a drink of water—my first in nearly 20 hours.

My rescuer, Capt. A. V. Francis, filled me in on some of the details when he visited me later. Helen and the doctors told me the rest.

Capt. Francis spotted me from about a half mile away, but, as he neared me and saw my head go under the water to watch an insweeping shark, he feared I was dead. When I was pulled aboard, he told me that I looked at his six- and eight-year-old granddaughters and mumbled: "My trousers. I don't have my trousers on. I'm in my underwear!"

Then I lapsed into unconsciousness. Apparently sometime during my struggle to survive, I had shed my waterlogged outer pants, but I don't remember it.

When I was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, doctors couldn't find pulse or blood pressure, but they pulled me through. I had lost ten pounds and I've been told chances are slim that I will have use of the three mangled fingers, yet I don't think I suffered half so much as Helen did worrying about me. They had picked up Jim at 8 a.m., four hours before they found me, so she was frantic with despair.

I'm a plumber and crippled hands will handicap me more than it might some others, but now that I'm home with my family I realize that it was a small price to pay. I've gone back to church since the ordeal, and I know I'm a pretty lucky man.