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Five Men Against the Sea

Their incredible mission was to sail
1,700 miles across the Pacific in a 22-foot gig!



The boat was running helplessly with the winds, coming broadside on the breakers.

By **HOWARD EARLE**

"YOU MAKE IT to Honolulu or we perish on this island like rats," Capt. Montgomery Sicard of the U.S.S. *Saginaw* told Coxswain William Halford.

Halford, a swarthy giant with a walrus mustache and thick brown hair, was the last of five volunteers to enter the *Saginaw's* gig. It was a decked-over 22-foot boat—never built to sail 1,700 miles across the Pacific in raging storms!

The men stranded on Ocean Island that November, 1870, were mostly members of a construction party that had been blasting a harbor. After the party had sailed for San Francisco, Captain Sicard ordered his side-wheel steamer to the island to look for reported castaways, but the *Saginaw* grounded on treacherous coral reefs and broke in two.

The few supplies that didn't wash out to sea sank to the bottom of the lagoon. They were fished out, dried in the sun, baked, and sealed in tins. The men on the island had been living for three weeks on brown albatross and seal steaks.

But this diet had the men down with dysentery and malnutrition. Their survival depended upon the gig reaching Honolulu and dispatching aid.

With four others, Halford set sail for Honolulu with the salvaged can goods, 90 gallons of fresh water, a crude cooking apparatus, and a lighted lantern. There were no matches.

The first night out Seaman James Muir thrust a knife into a can of beans. There was a sudden pop, a quick wheeze. A foul odor drifted through the boat. Two more cans of beans, a tin of rice, and three cans of grits popped, wheezed, and emitted the same foul odor. All spoiled!

"We'll have to go back," Muir blurted.

"Never," bellowed Halford. "We'll eat the stuff if it kills us!" It nearly did, and the remainder went overboard.

Violent storms raked the ocean, making a plaything of the little boat. Halford spent most of his time at the tiller. The others were too sick to spell him. One day he sighted a huge log beyond the gig's bow. He fought to avoid it, but the wind and waves were too much for him. The gig shuddered as her bottom struck. She stood fully awash, teetering crazily. Then a roller swept in and lifted the boat over.

"We're done for!" Lieut. John Talbot screamed from the hatch. "The boat's streaming water."

Halford knew what had happened. The crash had opened seams in the boat's bottom. The sea was rushing in.

Succeeding storms opened more seams. The men bailed continuously, and the skin between their fingers and toes split. Their joints, continually wet, stiffened and throbbed.

Twenty-eight days out of Ocean Island, Halford scanned the horizon in the first clear light of dawn. His heart leaped. "Land! Land!" he screamed.

But the wind and the sea were not done with him. The wind hauled around to the southwest and blew up a gale. For three days land lay in sight, but they couldn't reach it. Near the close of the third day, Halford went below to sleep but was jolted awake by the gig's motion.

The boat was running before the wind, close to the outer line of breakers. She came out broadside on the breakers and pitched over, catapulting Halford into the sea.

Halford climbed on the gig's bottom and ripped off his water-soaked clothes. He clung to the boat as the sea tossed it like a barrel in a whirlpool. He got the boat righted and steered it into a quiet channel.

A STARVED, naked skeleton, Halford waded ashore at Kali-chi Kai, Hawaii, after 31 days at sea. He brought the gig into port dismasted, waterlogged, and stove in at the bow after a 1,700-mile voyage through fierce storms.

Exhausted and crippled by a splinter in his knee, Halford dropped on the sands and slept until a hot sun awakened him. Then he staggered over the island and found natives who recovered the bodies of the others. Halford sailed to Honolulu and reported to the U. S. Consul. All hands were rescued from Ocean Island.

Halford was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Years later, when America entered World War I, Halford at 75 was recalled to active duty and commissioned a lieutenant, senior grade. The Government accorded him a final honor in January, 1943, when a destroyer was christened the U.S.S. *William Halford*.

Still on exhibit at the U.S. Naval Academy are the *Saginaw's* gig and sextant, together with a plaque commemorating the gallantry of the men who sailed her.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT SHORE