

An Old Man And A Bucket Of Shrimp

Written by Andy Owen



This is a true story - a version of it first appeared in a book "In the Eyes Of a Storm" by Max Lucado - and I am indebted to my old chum Malcolm for sharing it with me - and giving me the opportunity to share it with you.

Please read it. You will be glad that you did.

It happened every Friday evening almost without fail, when the sun resembled a giant orange and was starting to dip into the blue ocean.

Old Ed came strolling along the beach to his favourite pier.

Clutched in his bony hand was a bucket of shrimp.

Ed walks out to the end of the pier, where it seems he almost has the world to himself. The glow of the sun is a golden bronze now.

Everyone's gone, except for a few joggers on the beach.

Standing out on the end of the pier, Ed is alone with his thoughts and his bucket of shrimp.

Before long, however, he is no longer alone. Up in the sky, a thousand white dots come screeching and squawking, winging their way toward that lanky frame standing there on the end of the pier.

Before long, dozens of seagulls have enveloped him, their wings fluttering and flapping wildly.

Ed stands there tossing shrimp to the hungry birds. As he does, if you listen closely, you can hear him say with a smile...

"Thank you. Thank you."

In a few short minutes, the bucket is empty. But Ed doesn't leave. He stands there lost in thought, as though transported to another time and place.

When he finally turns around and begins to walk back toward the beach, a few of the birds hop along the pier with him until he gets to the stairs, and then they, too, fly away.

And old Ed quietly makes his way down to the end of the beach and on home.

If you were sitting there on the pier with your fishing line in the water, Ed might seem like a 'funny old duck,' as my dad used to say.

Or, to onlookers, he's just another old codger, lost in his own weird world, feeding the seagulls with a bucket full of shrimp.

To the onlooker, rituals can look either very strange or very empty. They can seem altogether unimportant, maybe even a lot of nonsense.

Old folks often do strange things, at least in the eyes of those a bit younger.

Most of them would probably write Old Ed off, down there in Florida.

That's too bad. They'd do well to know him better. They could learn so much from him.

Ed, to give him his full name, is Eddie Rickenbacker.

Eddie Rickenbacker was the founder of Eastern Airlines.

Before WWI he was a seriously good racecar driver. He was a national figure and nicknamed 'Fast Eddie'.

In WWI he was a pilot and became America's first ace. He flew more patrols, more hours in the air, than any other pilot in the service, a total of 300 combat hours. He brought down 15 aircraft in the final six weeks of the war, bringing his total victories to 26 and making him The United States 'Ace Of Aces' for the war.

Rickenbacker was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross a record eight times.

One of these awards was converted in 1930 to the Medal of Honor. He was also awarded the Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre by France.

In 1919, Rickenbacker was discharged from the Army Air Service with the rank of Captain.

In WWII he was an instructor and military adviser, and he flew missions with the combat pilots.

In October 1942, he was sent on a tour of the Pacific Theatre to review conditions and operations - and to personally deliver a secret message to General Douglas MacArthur.

During this tour, the B-17, in which he was flying, went hundreds of miles off course from its first scheduled stop at Canton Island.

Something went wrong with the navigation due to a severe shock in a pre-takeoff incident. In the end, the pilots were forced to ditch the plane in the Pacific Ocean, dangerously close to Japanese-held enemy territory.

Miraculously, all of the seven-man crew survived the ditching, crawled out of their plane and climbed into three life rafts.

Rickenbacker was still suffering from injuries from a prior airplane crash. Adamson, his business partner, sustained serious injuries in the water landing - and others in the crew were hurt to varying degrees.

But, they were all alive.

Captain Rickenbacker and his crew floated for days on the rough waters of the Pacific.

They fought the sun.

They fought the sharks.

But, most of all, they fought hunger and thirst.

By the eighth day, their rations ran out. No food. No water.

They were hundreds of miles from land and no one knew where they were - or even if they were alive.

Every day across America, millions wondered and prayed that Eddie Rickenbacker might somehow be found alive. There had been an extensive search going on and it was called off after two weeks.

But, Rickenbacker's wife pleaded for an extension - and the search continued for another week.

The men adrift needed a miracle. And they knew it.

They tried to nap, but it was difficult. Their throats were dry, their stomachs empty and painful - and their minds were playing tricks.

Ed leant back and pulled his military cap over his nose. Time dragged on. All he could hear was the slap of the waves against the raft.

Suddenly Eddie felt something land on the top of his cap. It was a seagull!

Old Ed would later describe how he sat perfectly still, planning his next move. With a flash of his hand and a squawk from the gull, he managed to grab it and wring its neck.

He removed the feathers and he and his starving crew made a meal of it.

It was a very slight meal for eight men.

Then they used the intestines for bait. With it, they caught fish, which gave them food and more bait. And the cycle continued. For the next few days, they survived by living on sporadic rainwater and similar food "miracles".

One of which happened during a very scary dark night, when a pack of sharks chased a school of mackerel through the three-raft convoy.

Two of the fleeing fish landed in the rafts and were captured and promptly eaten. It was the first food they had eaten in nearly a week.

They were staying alive - just.

Eddie had taken over the leadership in the rafts, trying hard to keep spirits up. But, he knew that they were in big trouble.

One serviceman died and was buried at sea. It was a low point.

Then, late in the afternoon of the 17th day, they heard the sound of a plane.

It was a monoplane aircraft with pontoons, flying low and fast in and out of squalls, about 5 miles away. Several of the men stood up, waved their arms and yelled even though they were too far away to be heard.

It bucked them up a bit.

The next two days they saw 6 more planes. But again, they were too far away. No planes were sighted the next day, but a fair amount of food appeared when hundreds of small sardine-like fish swam by.

The men captured a couple of dozen of them, which meant they could enjoy sizable portions of both food and water.

The following afternoon, one of the men - Cherry - announced he wanted to man the small raft and try to find land. This resulted in a heated discussion between the men.

Rickenbacker finally agreed to let him try, even though he felt it was a bad idea, believing that one raft would be more difficult to see than three.

Cherry said his goodbyes and drifted away...

A few hours later, two of the other men - Whittaker and De Angelis, also said that they also wanted to try it on their own.

Reynolds, who was also in their boat, was too sick to be aware of anything. They had concluded there was nothing to be gained by staying together.

Rickenbacker disagreed with them. He felt they stood a better chance of being spotted if they stayed together.

But, they were set on going. So, he reluctantly agreed and they too drifted away.

This left Rickenbacker alone with two very sick men: Adamson and Bartek, the former seemingly hanging on to life by a thread.

They had a little water and no food.

On the morning of the 21st day, Rickenbacker poured a jigger of water for each, but neither Adamson nor Bartek could raise their heads to drink.

Rickenbacker successfully scooped up several small fish, but he realised that his strength, too, was ebbing away.

It seemed unusually hot, and Rickenbacker kept looking for a sign — any sign - that might indicate land was in the vicinity. There was none. Not even a gull.

It was November 13th 1942. Their 24th day at sea.

It was to be a significant day. Rickenbacker heard planes—and, sure enough, two floatplanes were approaching from the southeast.

He waved his old hat as hard as he could, but the aircraft disappeared to the west. It was another kick in the guts.

He knew darkness would arrive soon and probably eliminate any chance of being found.

But, soon after, their luck turned. 30 minutes after first sighting the planes, they returned and headed straight for them. The planes were low enough that Rickenbacker could see the pilot in one of them smiling and waving a hand.

They were U.S. Navy! They had been found!

But, after circling the raft, both planes headed away. This was yet another concern, as the sun would be going down soon and there was a squall on the horizon to the south.

But, Rickenbacker knew that they would be back. Probably with help.

He was right. They had been low on fuel and needed to return to base to get topped up.

About an hour later, both planes reappeared, descended to a low altitude, and as one of them few off, the other circled above, causing Rickenbacker to wonder whether they would be rescued that night or if they would have to stay another night in the raft.

If they did, he doubted that Adamson would survive.

Just as dusk was turning to dark, the pilot released a white flare and a minute later fired a red one. Rickenbacker realised that he must have been signalling a ship, which soon appeared on the southern horizon, blinking a code signal.

The pilot began a short glide and settled down on the water not far from the raft. He taxied over and killed his engine.

Relief and emotion surged through Rickenbacker's veins and Bartek too, was clearly emotional. Adamson was still unconscious.

As Rickenbacker grabbed hold of the plane's pontoon, the fliers climbed out on a wing. They reported that a PT-boat was en route to pick up the men in the raft.

But, since the Japanese were in the area, they did not want to signal the boat with additional flares. Instead, they decided to load the three survivors on the plane and taxi toward the vessel.

The pilot told them that Captain Cherry had been picked up and Whittaker, De Angelis and Reynolds had also been rescued from a deserted island.

Adamson was carefully lifted into the cockpit. Then, amazingly, the crew tied Rickenbacker to one of the wings and Bartek to the other and then taxied the plane on the water towards the vessel that was heading in their direction.

With their legs dangling off the leading edges of the wings, Rickenbacker and Bartek survived a wild half-hour ride in pitch darkness to the rescue vessel.

On arriving at the boat, it was decided that Rickenbacker and Bartek would be taken aboard, but they needed to get Adamson to an island base 30 miles away, as he was in a very bad way.

When they arrived at the base they were taken straight to the hospital. It was a one-story building with less than a dozen beds and no air conditioning.

Despite his demand for more, Rickenbacker was allowed only two ounces of water every two hours that first night.

During that night Rickenbacker craved water more than at any time during his long ordeal at sea.

The next day, a flying boat flew them to larger medical facilities on Samoa. All the men from the rafts were reunited there and there was understandable joy and emotion.

Rickenbacker wired Secretary of War Stimson that he expected to be well enough to continue his mission in about two weeks.

General Arnold sent word that he would send a plane from the United States as soon as Rickenbacker was ready.

After two weeks of drinking gallons of fruit juice and eating everything placed before him, the man the Boston Globe called 'The Great Indestructible' was feeling great and had regained half of the 40 pounds he had lost

He contacted General Arnold with the message that he was ready to go.

Before leaving, however, Rickenbacker had to break the news to Adamson that he would have to stay behind, but promised to pick up his aide on the way back home.

They were all suffering from exposure, dehydration and starvation.

On a final note, Rickenbacker, despite being weakened by the ordeal completed his assignment and delivered his report to MacArthur.

It has never been made public.

When he did finally return home to a hero's welcome, he briefed Secretary Stimson and made extensive recommendations about survival equipment that should be adopted on a priority basis.

Among them was a rubber sheet to protect raft occupants from the sun, as well as to catch water. Another was the development of small seawater distilling kits. Both items eventually became standard equipment aboard lifeboats and aircraft life rafts.

Eddie Rickenbacker lived many years beyond that ordeal and continued to be very successful. He reluctantly retired from Eastern on the last day of 1963, at age 73.

He bought a small ranch near Hunt, Texas, but, over time, his wife fell out of love with it, as she thought it was too remote.

After five years, they donated the ranch to the Boy Scouts, lived in New York City for a while - and then moved to Coral Gables, Florida.

Eddie was visiting Switzerland, when he contracted pneumonia and died on July 23, 1973.

His eulogy was delivered in Miami by General James H. 'Jimmy' Doolittle.

Four jet fighters flew overhead during the ceremony.

One turned on its afterburners and zoomed up and out of sight in the traditional Air Force 'missing man' salute to a brother pilot.

Eddie Rickenbacker was truly a remarkable man.

He poured scorn on anyone who settled for half-measures, uttered half-truths, straddled the issues, or admitted the idea of failure or defeat.

He was a winner and a true American hero.

But he never forgot the sacrifice of that first life-saving seagull.

And he never stopped saying, 'Thank you.'

That's why almost every Friday night he would walk to the end of the pier with a bucket full of shrimp and a heart full of gratitude.

It's just another story about the trials and sacrifices that brave men and women endured for our freedom.

I found it an inspirational story to write. I hope you have enjoyed it.

It is a reminder, if any was needed, to give more respect to the older generation, as you just never know what they have done during their lifetime.

