

# No More Sea...

By James Henderson

Growing up not far from the coast, I loved to hear stories about the sea.

Occasionally you'd hear of a shipwreck's masthead being uncovered in the sand, or of a relic being washed ashore. Such things fired my childish mind with wild imaginings. In particular, I liked the idea of coming across a barnacled chest full of pirate treasure, some of Shakespeare's "wedges of gold... heaps of pearl, inestimable stones, unvalu'd jewels" from "a thousand fearful wrecks".<sup>1</sup>

A new movie, *The Finest Hours*, based on the book of the same name by Michael Tougias, was released this February and it depicts the story of a hazardous rescue attempt by the US Coast Guard in February 1952, when two separate oil tankers broke in half off Cape Cod during a severe winter storm. Other films have shown the ferocity of the sea. Perhaps you know some of them, such as *The Cruel Sea*, *The Perfect Storm*, and *The Poseidon Adventure*.

The reality of being trapped on a sinking ship, or of being adrift

at sea, not rescued, is a living terror. Survivors have written about experiencing these kinds of fears. Owen Chase, the First Mate of the whale-ship *Essex*, which sank in 1820 when it was rammed twice by a massive sperm whale, recalled how "every countenance" of those few who managed to get on the lifeboats "was marked by the paleness of despair",<sup>2</sup> and, as time went on, some of them resorted to cannibalism in order to survive the 1,000-mile stretch to the nearest land.

Other examples come to mind. A chilling account of the 1912 Titanic disaster, describes the fate of those stuck in the freezing Atlantic Ocean: "...the volume of the cries had dramatically reduced, indicating that the cold had killed or incapacitated most in the water".<sup>3</sup>

When the Soviet nuclear cruise-missile submarine *Kursk* sank 58 fathoms (350 feet or 108 metres) to the bottom of the Barents Sea in August 2000, governmental delays and inaction meant that no one helped quickly enough, and as a result, all 118 of her crew died. When the rescuers made it eventually to the ship, the full agony of what happened to some of the sailors came to light. Not all had died quickly, as the

Russian authorities had thought. Twenty-three of them spent days in a small, dark compartment near the stern of the submarine, where they suffered from hypothermia as the oxygen ran out. Using the luminosity of the hands of their watches, some scribbled notes to their friends and families. Midshipman Andrei Borisov wrote: "If you are reading this note, it means I am dead".<sup>4</sup>

Shipwrecks and dangerous seas have been in the news several times this year. It was with great relief that the cargo ship *Modern Express* was towed to safety in February. Its cargo appeared to have shifted in heavy seas off France, and caused the vessel to list to one side, setting it adrift for over a week.

Do you remember the March 2014 disappearance of Malaysian airliner MH370 while en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing? Over two years later there has been no sign of its 239 passengers and crew. The current plan is that, unless any clear new leads come to light, the search may be called off by the end of 2016. Our thoughts and prayers go out still to the relatives and friends of those who vanished without a trace. While searching the depths of the Southern Indian Ocean for any clue to the fate of MH370, investigation teams

have come across two previously unreported shipwrecks. The latest is of a 19th-century vessel, which was discovered using sonar equipment in January this year. What happened to the sailors and passengers involved? Were they rescued, or did they go down with the ship into the murky pages of history?

By extension we could ask about all those lost at sea since sailing began. What about those migrants and refugees who drowned last year and this when trying to flee across the Mediterranean Sea from Syria or North Africa to Europe? Or, indeed, the multiple millions who have died before them, largely forgotten now.

Is there any hope for the dead? Are they somewhere now in an alternative reality, or have they just sunk deep into obscurity, gone forever?

Different religions suggest various options (or none) about the long-term prospects of the dead. One religion, Christianity, specifically mentions the sea in a scenario of hope. It's noted in the biblical book of Revelation, which was written by Jesus' disciple, John. In envisioning the end of time as we know it, John writes that "the sea gave up the dead that were in it". Not only that but also death and the grave "gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done".<sup>5</sup> Scholars debate what this means exactly, but

one thing remains certain: biblically speaking, the end of our physical life is not the end of our individual stories. Somehow we continue.

Personally, I don't like the idea of being judged according to what I have done. Do you like it? What humanity has done collectively and what many of us have done individually is not good news. There is, however, hope because John linked the idea of judgment to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Judgment is intrinsically bound up, not so much in what we have done, but in what Jesus has done for us. On the cross of Jesus forgiveness is found for our sins, which are our bad works, the wrong actions we all have done to one degree or another.

Therefore, in Jesus there is hope for the dead and the living. That is why Christians celebrate the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus—they are our hope.

John also explained that one day there will be no longer any sea.<sup>7</sup> I wonder what he meant by that. Does he mean the end of the beauty of a glorious sunset over the coasts, or the enjoyment of sailing? For my part I don't see it that way. John, I think, clarifies it as he writes: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".<sup>8</sup> No more drowning, no more

distress or hurt at sea—the cruel seas are over.

The same John who recorded the story of Christ's life and who penned the amazing book of Revelation also wrote letters to some churches he knew. In one of them he explained that this rescue of us on the cross of Jesus was not just for people who believe it to be so, but for the whole world.<sup>9</sup> It means that, in the tumultuous seas of humanity, no one is missing in Christ. You and I, in fact everyone, is accounted for.

In fact, not only is there hope for us all in what Jesus has done for us, but also you could say that our being forgiven is the beginning of our finest hours...

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, Act 1: Scene IV..
- <sup>2</sup> Owen Chase, *Beneath the Heart of the Sea: the Sinking of the Whaleship Essex*, Hesperus Press UK, 2015, p. 24.
- <sup>3</sup> Ingar Sheil, *Titanic Valour (the life of the fifth officer: Harold Lowe)*, History Press UK, 2012, p.77.
- <sup>4</sup> Sam Willis, *Shipwreck: A History of Disasters at Sea*, Quercus Editions Ltd., 2008 p.331.
- <sup>5</sup> Revelation 20:13.
- <sup>6</sup> John 12:31–32.
- <sup>7</sup> Revelation 21:1.
- <sup>8</sup> Revelation 21:4.
- <sup>9</sup> 1 John 2:2.

This article was first published in the March 2016 issue of *Because* magazine ([www.because.uk.com](http://www.because.uk.com)). Reprinted with permission.