

The Little Hospital That Could

When Morgan City Saved U-Boat Victims

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The following is based on the upcoming book *So Close to Home*, the true story of a Texas family's fight for survival during World War II. This article is based on research from the book and concerns the Downs family's arrival at Morgan City General Hospital after a German U-boat sank their merchant ship, United Fruit Company's *Heredia*, near the Ship Shoal Buoy, 50 miles south of Morgan City in May 1942.

"Sonny, get up," it was Ray shaking Sonny's shoulder. "The boat's at the dock."

Eight-year-old Sonny sat up and rubbed his eyes. Beyond the heavy wooden pilings visible through the porthole next to his berth were buildings and people. Deckhands were throwing heavy coils of lines to secure the vessel.

It was the scene Sonny should have experienced 24 hours previously, on the *Heredia*. It took him a moment to absorb the reality that the chafing sunburn on his legs under the bedsheet, the scratches on his arms, and the growling hunger in his belly meant the shipwreck ordeal wasn't just a nightmare.

"Where's Lucille, Dad?" Sonny asked about his 11-year-old sister, whom he hadn't seen since they went to bed on the *Heredia* nearly 30 hours before. He'd heard she had been picked up by another shrimp boat but was anxious to see his family together again, to know they'd go back to a normal life after his surreal experience drifting on a raft at sea. It hardly seemed possible now that solid ground was before him and cars were driving past and people around the docks were going about their usual business without so much as a glance at the shrimp trawlers that were docking.

"Now Sonny," Ray said. "Here are some pants for you. They're not going to fit, but it's better than walking around in your undershorts. Just hike them up and hold on, and we'll see Lucille soon. I have to help your mother now, you go up on deck."

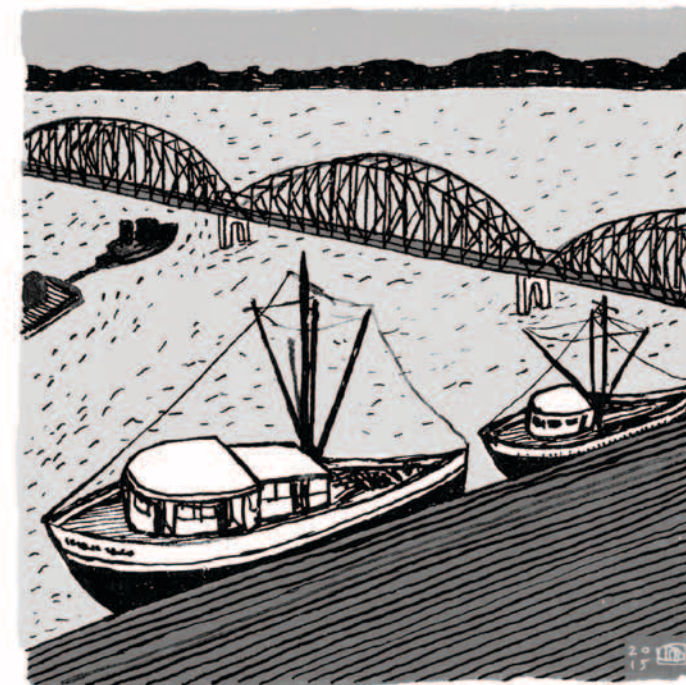
Sonny pulled up the light cotton pants and, despite being tall for his age, was nearly swallowed up by the fabric. A T-shirt on the bed was also for him, so he gingerly slid it on over his sunburned arms and shoulders, remembering briefly how his father had demanded the captain's coat to protect him from the relentless sun on the flimsy balsa and canvas life raft while sharks circled beneath them. The memory caused a jolt of fear to shake his body, and he put the thought of the barren sea baking in the sunlight out of his mind, moving clumsily toward the companionway to the deck.

When Ray emerged on deck he was carrying Ina, wrapped in a blanket, her eyes bandaged shut.

"Mama!" Sonny exclaimed. Ina held out a hand to him. Her skin was still grayish and discolored from the oil she landed in, her hair matted and wild. She looked a little scary, Sonny thought, but his heart nearly burst just to see her in her father's arms. He walked alongside his parents to the gangway, then looked up at the dock and realized it was lined with police cars and ambulances. An orderly waited beside a gurney at the end of the ramp.

The boats had docked right in town, where the Atchafalaya River met Morgan City's Front Street. Sonny felt a little dazed by the jarring change from rocking boat to hard pavement, from the steady hum of the shrimper to the buzz of traffic and voices all around him. A row of buildings across the street from the docks offered shopping and restaurants while behind him a tug boat growled against a barge as it headed up the brown river under a scallop-shaped bridge. More shrimpers were tying up at the dock, discharging sailors in partial uniforms and covered by blankets. From one boat a man's body was grimly passed to people on the dock.

On the brief ride to the hospital Sonny gazed out the window at the lush greenery of Morgan City, the graceful, gray Spanish moss hanging



from trees, the bright flowers that screamed at his eyes which had been numbed by the days of gray-on-blue he experienced at sea. He was excited to see cars and trucks and people again, knowing he never had to get on another ship if he didn't want to.

The small hospital was bustling. Sonny was seated in a hallway outside an examination room while inside his mother and Lucille were alone quietly talking as Ina was waiting for a doctor to discuss her recovery.

Sonny didn't understand why he had to wait outside, and he fidgeted in his chair, anxious for the door to open. He spent the time watching nurses move quickly up and down the hallway, dressed in white uniforms from head to toe. Some of the *Heredia* sailors shuffled past in oil-soaked clothing, their arms and faces bright pink with sunburn, one still holding a life jacket. Nuns in black habits flew past like blackbirds. One nurse leaned close to Sonny, took his temperature and listened to his heart, scribbling notes on a clipboard.

"Can I see my sister now?" he asked eagerly.

"Young man, you were in a very serious shipwreck," the nurse said as a grin crept across her face. "Are you sure you are well enough to visit?"

"Well, I am hungry," he admitted. "But we didn't know where Lucille was. She wasn't on the raft with Dad and me. And my mom, she was swimming by herself in the ocean. She got all covered with oil. It's in her eyes and her hair."

A familiar voice chirped from the examining room. "That's her, that's Lucille!" he said. The nurse nodded and smiled. Sonny bolted to the doorway and saw Lucille leaning close to their mother, telling her about waving down the shrimp boat with flags on a long piece of wood. Ina's eyes were bandaged but she was smiling, her hand stroking Lucille's hair.

The boy burst into the room and awkwardly hugged his sister, both of them crying and laughing at the same time, relieved to be together.

Soon Ray stepped into the room accompanied by a doctor in round spectacles. He suggested that the kids go to the cafeteria while Ina's eyes were examined.

A small cafeteria in the basement overflowed with hungry sailors, some sitting in the hallway outside. Their eyes brightened when they saw Sonny and Lucille, but the talk was subdued and smiles were rare. To Sonny the food seemed endless, with glasses of milk, cups of juice, eggs and toast, grits and fruit salad. His stomach grumbled, he wanted to gobble all of it down. "When we were on the raft I found a banana in the water," Sonny said, remembering how he tried to hold onto the piece of green fruit, then lost it, then found it floating by again. He didn't think he'd ever eat a banana again.

Despite all of the people in the cafeteria the room was quiet. Some of the *Heredia* crewmembers were still dressed in ragtag uniforms, tattered and dirty. Others wore borrowed clothing like Sonny's, mismatched and too big or too small. They sat with the second mate, Roy Sorli, who'd jumped off the ship with Lucille in the darkness and stayed with her through the long hours until their rescue, telling stories to distract her from worrying about her family. Sorli looked tired and his arms were covered with sunburn and bright red welts from jellyfish. The men around them had been so friendly aboard the ship but were quiet now, and the children knew the sinking had changed something in each of them. Sitting there eating felt sad and lonely. Suddenly Sonny wanted to be back with his mother and dad.

"Mama's covered in oil," Sonny said to Sorli. "It got in her eyes. Her skin is still blackish. She can't see much."

"But we can still talk to her, she's still Mama," said Lucille. "Let's bring her some toast and jam. She'll be hungry too." Lucille wrapped some bread in a napkin.

Seeing the sailors triggered something in Sonny and he fought to hold back tears. He remembered the shouts for help in the night from both crew and passengers and his father's desperate attempts to return to the sinking ship to find Ina. The feeling of not knowing if he'd ever see his mother again washed over him, which made his eyes welled up and his lip quiver. "I want to see Mama," he said quietly. Lucille took his hand and they walked down the hall.

A man in a crisp Navy uniform and carrying a clipboard was just arriving at Ina's room asking to talk to Ray about the *Heredia*. As he followed the ensign out of the room, Ray told Ina he'd try to make a telephone call to her parents in Gainesville before any news of a shipwreck caused alarm.



The children were curious about everything, but neither Ina nor Ray had the answers they sought. Did Mr. Beach survive the attack? How soon would Ina's eyes be clear? How long would they be at the hospital? How would they get home to Texas? The same questions gnawed at Ina and Ray. The only one that was easy to answer was whether they would see the old family car again, which had been in the cargo hold of the *Heredia*. Ina smiled and asked Sonny to imagine the old Chevrolet with fish swimming around in it. She said they'd never have to change another tire on it again, and that actually seemed funny to Lucille. It wasn't so funny to Sonny however, when he made the connection between the sunken ship, the car and so many other small items they'd left behind when they evacuated.

"My scooter!" Sonny wailed. "Sonny, we can find you another scooter," Ina said. "What's important is that we're safe and sound."

"Roy and the other sailors said lots of people died. They're dead. The torpedoes killed them," Lucille said.

Ina explained to Sonny and Lucille that yes, some of the sailors they knew had died in the shipwreck, whether they didn't make it out of the ship in time or were too badly hurt

to survive. It was their first experience with death, and Sonny suddenly understood the quiet cafeteria, the subdued talk in the hospital. He also thought back to his father's frantic, almost hysterical desire to swim back to the sinking ship to find Ina and Lucille. He knew people were dying at that moment.

Ray returned with a bag of clothes, and shook out the contents at the foot of the bed. There was a smock for Lucille and short pants and a shirt for Sonny, not new clothes but clean and in the right size. Ina told them to find a bathtub before they put the clean clothes on, and to be sure to scrub their hair to get all of the salt out of it. Then they could go back to the cafeteria for a little more food.

When the children left the room, Ina took a deep breath and began to sob. The reality of the situation was sinking in. She felt she'd witnessed the children age in front of her as they realized people had died, that they'd never see their scooter or old clothes again. It was a loss of innocence and completely out of her control to protect them from it. Crewmen who played checkers with them the day before were now dead.

Without saying a word Ray understood her churning emotions and sat on the bed to embrace her. "What did the Navy man tell you?" she asked.

"He said we can't share any details of the sinking yet. He just wanted to know what happened before and after the torpedo hit," Ray said. "I

was asleep before, so I told him as best I know. If only they had let us off the ship in Corpus the other night."

"I wasn't asleep," Ina said. "Before it hit. I couldn't sleep. I had the most awful feeling Ray, like I knew something was going to happen."

"We were the lucky ones, Ina," Ray said. "Our whole family made it. All of us. There were 62 people onboard that ship and so far they've found just 27 alive. A few who were badly injured got picked up by that seaplane and taken to another hospital. Mr. Beach wasn't found. I can't believe he went back to his cabin when they were telling us to evacuate. A few sailors may still be out there, but the Navy doesn't think they'll pick up any more survivors. It's amazing that we survived. Someone was looking out for us."

Ray then announced that his decision to join the military was firm and nothing could change his mind. He explained how he'd seen the dead bodies of dozens of crewmen in a room at the hospital. He had to do his part to stop the Germans from killing more Americans.

A woman knocked on the door.

"Mrs. Guidry, come in," said Ray. "Ina, this is Louise Guidry, a neighbor who has offered to help."

Louise explained that the tiny hospital was overwhelmed by the *Heredia* survivors. They'd sent most of the hospital's patients home when the shrimp boats radioed that they were bringing in injured survivors, mobilizing she and others from Morgan City who brought extra clothing from their families and were baking food too. She was a tiny, olive-skinned Cajun with dark hair and bright eyes.

"We were so surprised to hear there was a family aboard," she cooed in her musical drawl. She said she would be happy to take the children during the day so Ina and Ray could rest, and, indicating Ina's matted hair, said she had something that would get the oil out. Within an hour Louise was hovering over Ina with tubs of shampoo, scrubbing and rinsing the sticky oil from her hair as the women chatted about their families, forming a lasting friendship.

Ina confided to Louise her worries about their lost savings which had been locked securely in the ship's safe when the *Heredia* sank to the bottom. Ray had signed a waiver of liability when they boarded the ship, acknowledging that safe passage was not guaranteed and releasing the company from responsibility for loss of life or possessions. But under the Costa Rican sun the possibility of falling prey to a torpedo attack along the way – particularly in American waters – seemed as remote as thoughts of winter. Now the worst had come to pass: the family was penniless and Ina partially disabled, relying on the kindness of strangers to put together even the most basic necessities such as clothing. It had been an entire year's pay, the reason they'd gambled on moving to South America. Now their nest egg and prospect for a future home was gone. They were starting from scratch again.

So Close to Home will be published in May 2016 by Pegasus Books and may be preordered through michaeltougias.com. Coincidentally, the National World War II Museum in New Orleans plans to open a new permanent exhibit this month on the Merchant Marines during WWII. Future special events at the museum may include a presentation on *So Close to Home* by the authors.