



# SURVIVOR

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FOR EIGHT GRUELING DAYS, FORT WORTH NATIVE TRESSELL HAWKINS SURVIVED THE OPEN SEA AFTER A FISHING TRIP GONE TERRIBLY WRONG.

It's pitch-black in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. Tressell Hawkins and two friends sit atop a capsized 23-foot catamaran with barely enough room for the three men. Just a few hours earlier, they were dreaming of tomorrow's fishing. Now they just hope to make it home alive.

Hawkins, 43, grew up a scrawny kid in Fort Worth, graduating from Southwestern High School. He loved the outdoors – always fishing and hiking. After graduating in 1985, he worked at a plastics plant and attended junior college. Since 2006, Hawkins worked as a truck driver in Markham – perfect for coastal fishing. His friend, James Phillips, 30, owned the company he drove for, and Curt Hall, 28, was head mechanic. Hawkins, unmarried and without children, considered both of his friends' families his own. The three loved fishing together – reeling in swordfish, marlin and red snapper offshore.

"It's just being out in the wild. It's so beautiful one moment and the next it will turn on you. So you have to just get out there and respect it and appreciate what God's done. It's beautiful surroundings, but there's always danger in those surroundings," Hawkins shares.

On Aug. 21, the friends left Matagorda in Phillips' boat, the Sea Chaser, planning to return the next day. Waters were calm with weather in the low 90s that Friday afternoon. They headed 80 miles out, trolling 15 miles past the Tequila Oil Rigs. Excited, they prepared their gear for Saturday as ZZ Top pulsed from the stereo. With the moon over the inky-black water, Phillips curled up in his sleeping bag about 11 p.m. Tressell and Hall talked another 45 minutes before doing the same. At 12:30 a.m., disaster struck.

"I was just trying to get comfortable on my bed," Hawkins says. "I put my foot down from my bed to try and move my sleeping bag around and get a better position. I felt water coming up knee-high."

The Sea Chaser was pandemonium. A broken bilge pump flooded the catamaran's pontoons and the boat itself – now leaking badly and with only seconds before flipping.

Just before capsizing, Hawkins, Phillips and Hall snagged lifejackets and plunged into the abyss. Locating each other, they held onto the boat. A 6-foot section of the front protruded a few feet above the water, and they scrambled up. Scared and alone, they listened to the sounds of the open water and creaks of their overturned vessel.

"It's the middle of the night, you really can't see anything. We were trying to wake up, and we had to switch straight to survival mode," Hawkins says. "We sat there for a good three or four hours before anybody said anything. We were wondering why this happened to us. There were a lot of questions going on in everybody's head."

Not panicking, Hawkins, Phillips and Hall scoured for food and stored it in a found cooler. They found two bags of chips, a pack of peanut butter crackers, chewing gum, some beer and some bottles of water. They rationed them. Unfortunately, the cooler also held gas fumes.

"Once we opened up a jug of water or once we opened up a bag of chips, and it sat out there in the sun all day, everything started tasting like gas," Hawkins says. "It was just a part of survival. It was mind over matter at that point."

Next, they used the sun to determine their location, 150 miles south of the oil rigs. On day three, they turned the motor, "steering"

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them toward another rig, which they planned to swim toward.

Conditions were terrible – cold at night and scorching during the day. They took turns clutching the boat for brief sleep in the water, which was warmer than the night air.

"It was so hot during the days that you'd stay in the water to keep cool. But at night you'd be cold from being wet all day, so we slept in the water to keep us warm. It was like getting into a sauna," Hawkins says.

Prayer and their families kept them going.

"Everyday we'd wake up and pray," he says. "Our faith was strong enough that we thought we were going to be rescued."

By day five, with the food gone, exhaustion and hunger took a toll. Hallucinations blurred reality. One night they ate a phantom pizza. Hawkins had cell phone "conversations" on his hand. The false realities sometimes presented danger. Phillips and Hawkins both walked off the boat at different times before their friends helped them back on.

Depleted of fresh water, they found a hose connected to a washdown tank and began siphoning water out, providing an extra 28 gallons.

Meanwhile, a massive search was underway. They spotted a plane and helicopter, but searchers didn't spot them, a helpless feeling.

"Once you've given up hope, that's when you lose the whole battle, and you might as well dig your grave. I've never been in a situation where I was completely helpless. After we got into international waters, we didn't see anything. It was just water and sky."

Days six and seven were miserable – their bodies wracked with severe sunburn, sores, blisters and jellyfish stings. Sharks circled the boat – attracted by their trickling blood, but were chased away by dolphins.

Finally on Saturday evening, Phillips and Hall spotted a fishing yacht. Yelling and using cans as reflectors, it soon made its way to the capsized Sea Chaser. Their prayers were answered.

"We were just rejoicing," Hawkins says. "We were just so happy ... it was a second chance at life."

Once aboard, the survivors were treated to showers, clean clothes, and steak and potatoes. At a Corpus Christi hospital, they were treated for extreme sunburn, open sores and bacteria in their blood. A day later, Hawkins' family brought him to Fort Worth for a celebration. Fifteen pounds lighter and barely walking, he was ecstatic to see loved ones again.

"It was great. It was absolutely wonderful," Hawkins remembers.

The ordeal bonded Hawkins, Phillips and Hall for life. Hawkins is recovering and taking it easy after surviving eight days adrift 184 miles offshore. It was also a nightmare for Hawkins' family, but they held out hope.

"Because of our faith, we knew God was in total control, and everything would be okay," Hawkins' oldest sister Terri Hudspeth says. "It was the waiting that took over our emotions ... and with a praying family, I knew my brother was going to come back to dry land." **fw**

by Sean Chaffin