

Oscar Camps has rescued thousands of desperate migrants in the Aegean and the Mediterranean. In recognition of this humanitarian work, he receives the Reader's Digest European of the Year award for 2019.

BY SORREL DOWNER

The Life Saver

IT'S DUSK, AND IN THE DEEP MEDITERRANEAN A BOAT IS SINKING. The rubber dinghy is designed to hold 30 people, but there are more than 100 on board, including many women and children. Several are dead; others dying, overcome by exhaust fumes. Among the crush of bodies, young and old slip under the water that's halfway up the inside of the vessel.

Each of them has gambled on getting to Europe to build a new and better life, and has risked all to fulfil this dream. There is no captain on board; no shelter, no food or water or, critically, spare fuel. Now, with storm clouds

gathering and the waves churning, their situation looks hopeless. But then, as the boat is all but submerged, comes the sound of an engine. A boat is approaching. Voices shout instructions: stay seated, stay calm.

"The first sensation you have when you spot a boat adrift or receive an alert," says Oscar Camps, "is joy, because you know you can help. The problems start once everyone is safely on board. There are injuries, babies, troubles with the boat, no space and nowhere to go. Every rescue mission is a human drama. You never know what is going to happen."

Camps has been involved in scores

of such human dramas. He knows all too well the price migrants and refugees can pay in their desperation to escape wars, persecution and poverty for a better life in Europe. As the founder of Proactiva Open Arms, a non-profit organisation dedicated to rescuing those in peril on the sea, he has spent

the last three years rescuing men, women and children from drowning in the Aegean and Mediterranean. At the last estimate, the number of lives saved by Proactiva was put at 59,395.

CAMPS HAS A DEEP-SEATED CONNECTION WITH THE SEA, and with saving lives. A 56-year-old father of

four, he grew up in Badalona, a Catalanian seaside city north of Barcelona. His home overlooks the sea at one end of a long beach. At the other end are the Proactiva offices and the boats it uses to rescue refugees.

"As a kid I used to come here every day with my grandfather," he says, as he walks along the beach. "There were no lifeguards back then, but a group of older strong swimmers used to keep a lookout, and he was one of them. He taught me a lot about the sea, although it was much later before I had anything to do with lifesaving."

Camps was in his early twenties and running a car rental business when

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Camps (pictured) saving lives on the Greek island of Lesbos in 2015.

he went to visit a friend and found the doorman of the apartment block collapsed in the street. "I didn't know what to do—he wasn't moving. I rang all the doorbells, but no one could help. I got him in the car and drove to the hospital. By the time I got there, he was dead. It affected me badly."

A few days later he signed up for a Red Cross course, and that led him to work for the Red Cross for six years. In December 1999 he decided to combine emergency response with his love of the sea and launched a beach lifeguard company.

Proactiva became the most successful life-saving company in Spain, with 600 employees in four locations. His life was good but, once again, a sense of compassion and duty were to change its course.

On 2 September 2015, a boat carrying Syrian refugees sank in the Ae-

gean. Camps was at home watching TV when a news broadcast showed the image of a three-year-old boy, Alan Kurdi, whose drowned body had been washed up on a Turkish beach. "My own son was the same age—I was really upset. I had to do something. I wrote to the Spanish government, the Greek government, aid organisations, embassies—everyone—offering to put our lifesaving equipment and specialist human resources at their disposal. No one replied."

So he took out his savings, and, with one of his team, Gerard Canals, flew to the Greek resort island of Lesbos.

That year, Lesbos had become the major staging post for people escaping war, violence and economic instability in the Middle East and Asia. Tens

OPENING SPREAD PHOTO: © DAVID S. BUSTAMANTE

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of thousands arrived on the island's shores after making the short but perilous crossing over the Aegean from Turkey. Hundreds drowned in the attempt.

When Camps and Canals arrived on Lesbos, they found chaos.

"TWO THOUSAND, THREE THOUSAND MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES were arriving every day from Turkey. None of the big aid agencies was there yet, just backpacker volunteers and a small local organisation," Camps says.

"The refugees had been told to slash the rubber boats before reaching land so they wouldn't be sent back in them. The boats were sinking, everyone falling in the water. There was panic. You

“PEOPLE WOULD BE CRYING AND EXHAUSTED. I HAD TO MAKE DECISIONS IN SECONDS ABOUT WHO TO SAVE.”

could hear people crying for help 100 metres offshore and no one was helping them. It was horrible.”

Taking the advice of human rights officials on Lesbos, Camps quickly set up an NGO so that they could stay long term. He was joined by two more of his lifeguards, then a

further dozen. They became the go-to team for rescue operations along the rocky northern coastline of the island. Some 75,000 refugees arrived that winter.

"We focused on the water and tried to ensure people didn't drown. Once we got them on shore, we returned to the water. We didn't sleep or eat properly, we were constantly wet and cold, and had cuts all over."

Initially, all they had with them were wetsuits, whistles, fins and lifeguard shirts. "We'd swim out to boat wrecks, but we couldn't pick everyone up. Mothers tied their children to their chests to keep them safe on the crossing. In the water their heads went beneath the surface. They would drown."

As he recounts the experience, his voice breaks. "People would be crying and exhausted. I had to make decisions in seconds about who to save. I'd pick up two children and return to find where there were five people, now there are only two: where are the



Camps (far left) launched Proactiva in 1999 as a Spanish lifeguard company.



others? Where are the parents? Every action has consequences—and I'll live with them for the rest of my life."

With his Open Arms team, Camps has rescued 59,000 migrants in the past three and a half years.

IN MARCH 2016, THE EUROPEAN UNION SIGNED AN AGREEMENT, giving Turkey money and political concessions in return for tightening its borders and keeping asylum seekers in the country. The migrant escape route to Greece was severely curtailed.

Elsewhere, another human tragedy was playing out. Partly due to the civil war in Libya, the number of migrants and asylum seekers attempting the far longer and perilous 300-mile route across the Mediterranean from Libya to Italy rocketed. In 2016, over 181,000 people arrived in Italy from north Africa. Thousands drowned.

Camps and his team switched their focus to the Mediterranean, but now they would need rescue boats.

Through crowdfunding, they eventually found three vessels: an old fishing trawler, Golfo Azzurro, their flagship Open Arms, and a boat called Astral: "It was a 1970s yacht from an Italian—a playboy," says Camps with a wry smile. "The complete opposite of what you need, but we used it to save 14,000 lives over the summer of 2016.

"We don't have the capacity to hold large numbers of people on our boats for long. We have to call the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre to request a transfer or permission to enter a port—and that can take hours, even days. Meanwhile, we're getting more alerts and have to respond. Overloaded boats can sink in a day if the weather turns. There have been times

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LOUISA GOULIAMAKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

when we have arrived to find nothing.”

Rescue completed, there is the question of where to take the migrants. Camps has found himself embroiled in the politics of the crisis—including the argument that boats rescuing migrants act as a “pull factor” both for migrants and traffickers.

Meanwhile, right-wing groups and populist political parties opposed to immigration are on the rise across Europe. The governments of Southern Europe are closing their ports to rescue ships.

None of this stops people fleeing wars, poverty or persecution trying to cross the Mediterranean. But it does mean that Proactiva’s boats, having saved refugees from the waves,

have found themselves turned away from ports. People in need of medical attention have died on board as a result. This makes Camps furious.

In an agreement between Italy and Libya, backed by the EU but condemned by the UN, Libyan coastguards now police the seas, putting the migrants they catch in detention centres. Last March, they threatened to open fire unless Proactiva’s boat Open Arms handed over the women and children among 218 people it had picked up outside Libyan waters. The crew refused and sailed to

Sicily, where they were charged with illegal trafficking and had their boat impounded.

The actions were condemned by Amnesty International’s campaigns director for Europe, Fotis Filippou: “Rather than being criminalised for trying to save refugees and migrants... NGOs saving lives at sea should be supported,” he said.

“I’ve received death threats—in five languages—for rescuing migrants,” says Camps. He and his team won’t stop doing what they see as the right thing. “It is a rule of international law that you rescue anyone in distress at sea. We’ll be wherever they are.”

CAMPS HAS A SMALL BOAT OF HIS OWN. He doesn’t take it out much, but when he needs to be alone to think, he leaves it moored and sits on it. “We all see a lot,” he says. “I cried a lot at the beginning, over the phone to friends, to my family. Straightaway, when we realised how emotionally tough it was going to be, we sorted out support.”

Now, rescue crews receive counselling from psychologists trained in crisis management and post-traumatic stress. “You experience a lot of emotion, adrenaline, testosterone—a lot of everything,” says Camps.

“Coming home, all I could think

about was my team still out there—cold, tired, swimming in the sea. It was difficult—for me, my wife and family, the business. I am fundamentally changed on every level.”

Between missions, he spends his time discussing migrants and migration—with heads of government, the world’s media, the European Parliament, even the Pope (twice)—explaining the consequences of bad politics on real lives, asking for help, pushing for action, trying to fix things.

“Oscar is a man of action and a person willing to stand up for his beliefs,” says Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch’s emergencies director. “He stood up for solidarity and humanity, the founding principles of the European Union, while European leaders were busy closing their doors and turning away, and as a result thousands of lives have been saved.”

While waiting for governments to come up with an integrated, durable European solution to hosting migrants, Camps is addressing some of the problems that drive people to make journeys in the first place. As he puts it, “For a lifeguard, the best rescue is the one that isn’t needed.”

Proactiva Open Arms Africa already works with partner charities in Ghana and Senegal. They emphasise the dangers and limited opportunities confronting migrants intent on a life in Europe. At the same time they provide the educational tools and skill-building that can help people improve

their lives in their countries of origin.

Europeans need to get used to migration and learn to coexist, Camps argues. “Environmental organisations protect whales and fight overfishing, but there are no groups defending human rights at sea. We would like to be in this black hole of maritime migration routes around the world—in countries that do not abide by international law and there’s no one to denounce them, where people are losing their lives and there are no doctors, or journalists to report it.”

CAMPS SAYS THE CREW WILL OFTEN PLAY MUSIC ON THE BOAT as they search the seas. At the top of the playlist is ‘Imagine’ by John Lennon, with its vision of a better world. “Imagine all the people living life in peace/You may say I’m a dreamer/But I’m not the only one/I hope someday you’ll join us/And the world will live as one.”

“We are just lifeguards with money raised via social media networks,” Camps says. “If we can do so much with so little, just think what 28 governments can achieve.”

READER'S DIGEST EUROPEAN OF THE YEAR Oscar Camps is the 24th winner of this annual award, which recognises an exclusive group of Europeans whose extraordinary work helps to make the world a better place.