

Survival Story: 438 Days Lost At Sea... (Video)

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Great lessons of survival come along with extreme and life changing experiences.

What would a 14 months drift on the ocean mean in terms of survival? Salvador Alvarenga knows it, for sure!

Alvarenga survived 438 days adrift in the Pacific Ocean, drifting 7000 miles from just off Mexico, to the Marshall Islands. His open 24' fiberglass boat was disabled in a storm and nearly all his gear was swept overboard, disabled or had to be cut loose to keep the boat from sinking.

His story is way beyond ordinary, and now he's sharing it in this exclusive interview for Survivopedia readers.

When I heard that he was going to be in Salt Lake City for PrepperCon 2017, where I hosted [two Q&A sessions on EMP survival](#), I wanted to meet him and hear his story firsthand.

The Survivor and His Unbelievable Story

At first glance, I must admit that I was somewhat skeptical. In my mind, this feat pushed the boundaries of what I thought was possible. Either way, I wanted to know. As I researched, read, interviewed and analyzed his ordeal at sea, I grew increasingly convinced that his story true. As you can plainly see in the video interview below, it is difficult for him to talk about the experience to this day.

<https://youtu.be/S2f-ckw6Iq4>

After the interview, I handed him a copy of the English Language version of the book Jonathan Franklin wrote about his experience. He looked at the book and flipped through the photographs, pointing and commenting as if he was seeing an old family album he had not looked at in a long time.

It was clear how deeply traumatizing the ordeal was for him and that he still compartmentalizes many aspects of the experience. This is very understandable given what he went through. That's why I admire Salvador for being willing to revisit those obviously painful memories in order to help others.

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7 Lessons Learned in 483 Days on the Sea

Salvador had some advantages going into his experience. He was a sharking boat captain with 12 years of experience in the open ocean. He was an outdoorsman who fished, hunted, camped and survived his way cross country to Mexico from El Salvador as an illegal immigrant.

His build was ideal, being compact and powerful, winning weight lifting competitions against the other hard working, hard fighting and hard partying fisherman of Costa Azul, which helped retard hypothermia.

So he was no stranger to adversity and problem solving. The man had an iron stomach and a lifetime of conditioning his immune system. He ate raw meats of all kinds, drank raw turtle blood and considered their meat and eggs to be delicacies. He hailed from a culture that considers turtle eggs to be something along the lines of naturopathic Viagra.

Here are the lessons to be learned from his story.

1. "90% of Survival Happens From the Neck Up"

I first heard it put in precisely this way by Adam Kay, the winner of Season 1 of *Alone*, but the primary lesson taught by Salvador Alvarenga's experience is the importance of the mental aspects of survival.

Psychology, mental toughness, bravery, adaptability, knowledge and problem solving ability made all the difference in this case. Alvarenga started out the ordeal with a crewman named Cordoba who lacked Salvador's fundamental optimism.

Religious faith works both ways. In this case, Salvador's companion was convinced by the vision that a sister from his religious congregation had while fasting. She told him that she foresaw that he would die at sea. His belief that he would die eventually consumed him and became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

After finding a partially digested venomous sea snake in the stomach of a sea bird he had eaten, he became physically ill and stopped eating birds which, since they lacked the gear to fish, were their primary food source. Cordoba eventually starved to death because he refused to eat, which has happened in other cases of survival at sea where survivors were unable to properly cook foods.

2. Catching and Eating Sea Birds Helps

Salvador eventually constructed a roost for sea birds to land on, under which he would lay motionless until birds got comfortable and started preening or dozed off. He would then grab them by the neck and break one of their wings to prevent their escape, eventually keeping a flock of up to thirty of them in the hull like a brood of anorexic broilers and "meat on the hoof."

He sun-dried meat from the birds on the outboard motor cover, using it as an improvised solar oven of sorts.

3. Turtles, Sea Birds & Raw Fish Eyes Contain Vitamin C

Vitamin C is present in small amounts in raw fish flesh, but occurs in greater amounts in fish eyes. Unlike us mammals, both birds and turtles produce their own Vitamin C, in which their livers are particularly rich.

Salvador ate enough sea turtle liver, bird liver and fish eyes to intake enough Vitamin C to stave off scurvy.

4. Use Floating Trash to Your Advantage

Salvador put floating trash found in or near shipping lanes to good use, occasionally even finding odd scraps of food or a few drops of soda. His haul included 73 half liter bottles which he used to store

rainwater and a large piece of Styrofoam which he said helped attract birds.

5. Adaptability Means Disobeying Conventional Training

Had many famous survival instructors swapped places with Salvador, they very likely would not have survived. Part of the problem is theory or book knowledge vs real world knowledge, and part is that it is becoming impossible to practice or teach survival in the preservationist, "leave no trace," overly litigious, fragilista-engineered world we live in.

While certain correct principles of survival apply to all environments and ecosystems, there are far too many ecosystems in this world to write one book that will teach you everything you need to know to survive in all of them, so it is imperative to learn from the locals.

Survival is an inherently dangerous activity and instructors are often compelled to err on the side of safety, which, taken to the extreme, prevents students from learning that which they need to know most of all.

Eating Trigger Fish

How many of you have an SAS Survival Guide in your pack? I have at least a couple of Lofty's books.

They are a great resource from a world-renowned instructor, but regarding triggerfish, the book advises readers, "Many kinds are poisonous to eat. Avoid them all." yet virtually every story of long term survival adrift in a boat or life-raft I have researched, whether it took place in the Atlantic or the Pacific, nearly all the survivors ate triggerfish because it is one of the first species begin nibbling at boats adrift, it is noisy when they do, and you may go long periods without access to other species.

While it is true that the flesh of any species of triggerfish could be contaminated with toxins which cause ciguatera, the risk with certain species of triggerfish is lower than others.

Do not get me wrong, ciguatera can be very serious and potentially fatal, especially in a survival situation, but ciguatera occurs in over 400 species of reef fish and the only way to completely avoid is to not eat any reef fish, restricting your diet to deep water species.

Had Salvador had some fishing gear, it would have been advisable to use the triggerfish as bait and chum and fish for deep water species, but he had no such option.



If you are eating fish in restaurants or fishing for recreation it makes sense to exercise a great deal of caution as you choose your meals. Lost at sea, your dining options are likely going to be considerably more restricted.

Avoid species prone to ciguatera like the titan triggerfish, barracuda and red snapper, but gray triggerfish is common table fare in restaurants in many tropical regions. Try to take them away from reef in deep water if possible.

If my choice was between starving to death and running a small risk of ciguatera, I would definitely eat gray triggerfish. Salvador ate more colorful varieties as well and in his situation, I would have done the same. If you ever find yourself there, that is a decision you will have to make.

When you are down to eating powdered fish bones mixed with water, your own hair and fingernails and even wood from the boat, they might start looking pretty tasty.

Eating Shark and Fish Liver

The US Military Multi-service Survival, Evasion & Recovery Field Manual, and therefore survival manuals and courses virtually without end that regurgitate the reference, say not to eat fish liver, period. Some species of fish liver is edible, however, but some is not. Some survivors begin craving liver, eyes and other parts of fish that contain nutrients or vitamins they are lacking.

Fish liver can carry parasites, but all fish body parts can transmit some species of parasites if eaten raw. Avoid eating the stomach of fish large enough to gut, especially raw, as it contains more parasites than any other part of the fish, but it makes great bait to catch other fish.

With reef species, ciguatera can build up in greater concentrations in the liver, so perhaps that is why the field manual blackballs it. Salvador used and even preserved shark liver by drying it for use as a laxative, which was very important due to his high-protein diet full of bird and fish bones. Ouch!

Eating "Raw" Birds and Sea Turtles

Lofty agrees that sea turtles are good eating, which is true, except for the critically endangered hawk's bill sea turtle which also tends to be contaminated with ciguatera. The hawk's bill sea turtle can be identified by yellow polka dots on the head and front flippers and can grow to very large size.

Eating raw bird meat can lead to bacterial infections or parasites. I got salmonella once from eating bird meat and it most certainly would have been fatal in a survival situation, but eating the flesh fresh, cutting it into very thin strips and sun drying it as Salvador did, greatly reduces numbers of pathogens.

If you can construct a makeshift solar oven, that would improve your chances. Salvador dried it on the outboard motor housing, but that was the closest thing he had. Keep in mind, though, that Salvador had eaten raw meat all his life, so that would have developed his immune system far beyond that of a typical North American or European.

Drinking Urine

Amongst survival instructors, this is almost as divisive a topic as 1911 vs Glock amongst the tactical pistol crowd. Instructors I respect have weighed in on both sides of the issue.

David Holladay, Cody Lundin, Matt Graham and the guys from Boulder Outdoor Survival School, say not to drink it, while Mykel Hawke, Joe Teti (never thought I would write that those two agree about something) and some of the military crowd saying it's a go ... no pun intended. In Salvador's case, Cordoba said it would help and they drank it. The question is whether it helped keep him alive or if he survived in spite of drinking it.

While healthy urine is not toxic, it does contain compounds your body is trying to eliminate and by the time you are in a situation where you are considering drinking your urine, it contains less water and higher concentrations of urea, salts and other waste products. If you store it, bacteria will grow in it and it will start to stink, so I would not save it for later. If you had the gear to distill it, you could distill seawater.

While it used to be taught that urine is microbiologically sterile until it reached the urethra, it is now known that that is not true. It is interesting that military guys would argue for it, because the US Army Survival Field Manual advises against it on the basis that it contains high concentrations of salts which will contribute to further dehydration, but I believe Mykel has a B.S. in biology, so perhaps he based his decision on that.

If you were urinating clear and copious, it would probably do a lot less harm to you, but that would mean you are not even thirsty yet. Did it help him? I doubt it, but the man did survive, so perhaps Mykel has a point. Even David Holladay seemed to reconsider his position for a moment when heard Salvador tell his story. I'm not convinced it changed his mind though. Maybe we should ask him. I am perfectly comfortable sitting inside the question and considering it without rushing to answer it.

6. Ecosystems Form Around Drifting Rafts and Boats

Studying cases of long-term survival adrift at sea shows a certain patterns. The ocean is our planet's greatest wilderness, with distinct ecosystems created by prevailing weather interacting with the ocean, underwater topography and land masses to produce currents, zones teeming life and rain and oceanic desert regions with little sea life or rainfall.

Fortunately, large sea creatures, drifting boats and rafts and even large floating debris create small, slow-moving ecosystems. The boat or raft creates shade and hiding places for small marine life. Algae and barnacles grow on the hull.

Sea birds find a place to land and leave droppings, which are eaten by small fish, attracting progressively larger fish, which survivors consume, returning offal and waste to the water and so on until the raft or vessel adrift, organisms that it shelters, survivor, predators and prey become a nomadic and slowly snowballing ecosystem. Every one of these organisms is a resource.

Some survivors used barnacles as bait and Salvador ate them for food.

7. Chances of Survival at Sea Are Linked to Location

There is a reason where tales of surviving long periods adrift occur in places like Mexico, the Marshall Islands, North Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil and California. They are all in latitudes relatively near the equator, where it is possible to survive exposure for longer periods of time.

Survival time for fishermen in the Bering Sea is measured in hours, even if they are wearing specialized survival suits. In, relatively speaking, warmer waters, there are portions of the ocean that receive too little rain to survive without a hand-pumped desalinator or some other way to get fresh water.

Did It Ever Happen Before?

Salvador is not the first one drifting away. Here are a few of many previous precedents for survival adrift at sea.

- In 1941, Olympian Louis Zamperini and Russell Allen Phillips survived 47 days adrift on two small life rafts after their B-24 crashed into the Pacific due to mechanical problems, eventually drifting into the Marshall Islands.
- In 1982, American Steven Callahan of Rhode spent 76 days on a life raft after his sailboat sank, probably after a collision with a whale.
- In 1973 Maurice and Maralyn Bailey of Britain were sailing to New Zealand when their yacht was struck by a whale and sunk. They survived 117 days adrift in a rubber raft before being rescued.
- In 1989, John Glennie, James Nalepka, Rick Hellriegel, and Phil Hoffman survived adrift in the South Pacific off the coast of New Zealand on the wreckage of their overturned Trimaran for 119 days.
- In 1942, Poon Lim was the sole survivor when the SS Benlomond was torpedoed by a German U-boat and survived 133 days adrift on an 8' square wooden raft until he was rescued off the coast of Brazil.
- In 2005, Jesus Vidana, Lucio Rendon and Salvador Ordonez, much like what happened to Salvador Alvarenga, were shark fishing off the West coast of Mexico when their 27' fiberglass boat was disabled and drifted to within 200 miles of the Marshall Islands before being

rescued. They lost two companions on the journey including the captain and consumed 103 sea turtles and many species of fish. Unlike Salvador and Cordoba, they had line and more tools which enabled them to fashion hooks from nails and screws.

- The longest anyone has ever survived adrift at sea was in the case of a Japanese cargo vessel captained by Oguri Jukichi a crew member named Otokichi in 1813. They drifted almost to California for 484 days before rescue and lost 12 crew members to scurvy. This case is hard to compare as it was a much larger vessel carrying hundreds of bags of beans.

One way or another, Salvador Alvarenga found his way to survival. He was not trained for it. He was a regular guy, like many of us are. His story is the proof that survival means much more than skills and training that one can have in advance. I'd say that what you have inside makes you a survivor.

Are you a survivor? Will you be able to protect your own in a life or death scenario? Click the banner below to find out!



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This article have been written by Cache Valley Prepper, based on his interview with Salvador Avarenga for Survivopedia.

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