

ACTIVITY: Adrift on a raft

CASE: 1953.03.00.b

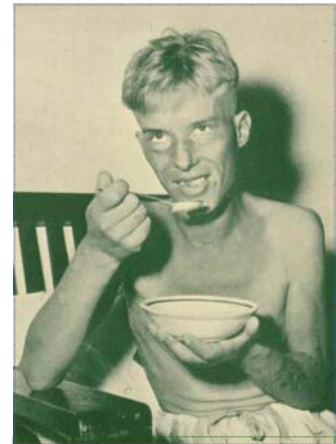
DATE: March 1953

LOCATION: Between the Straits of Malacca and Sri Lanka.

BOAT: Small raft

OCCUPANTS: Two men: Ensio Tiira and Fred Ericsson

NARRATIVE: At 03h00 on the morning of February 23, 1953, the transport *Skaubryn*, outward bound from Algeria to Indo-China (Vietnam) with troops of the French Foreign Legion, entered the Straits of Malacca and two Legionnaires slipped silently overboard in the darkness of the tropical night. Ensio Tiira, a Finn, and his Swedish friend, Ericsson, were deserting the Legion. They had joined voluntarily but had become disillusioned with the hardship of the Legion. As the ship passed within a few miles of Sumatra they lowered their tiny canvas raft, four-feet square, clambered aboard with a flask of wine and a few scraps of food, believing that an hour or so of paddling would bring them to land. Instead, they drifted day-after-day on the sea, followed by sharks. On the 18th day, Ericsson died and sharks consumed his body. On March 27, 1953, after 32 days at sea and 700 miles from his starting place, the lone emaciated figure of Tiira — weighing less than 50 pounds — was sighted on the battered raft by the British freighter *Alendi Hill* bound for Singapore and he was rescued. Afterwards, Tiira wrote a book about his experience: *Raft of Despair*. Relevant sections of the book are included in this report.



Tiira, first meal in Singapore General Hospital

SPECIES INVOLVED: Unknown

SOURCE: Ensio Tiira



Tiira, after discharge from Singapore General Hospital

Thirteen

A SHARK IN THE RAFT

WE SHOULD have been forewarned by our earlier experience with the sharks and the behaviour of the "pilot", who was standing guard over us like an angry hen protecting her chickens. But the attack took us by surprise. The fins had disappeared and we thought the sharks had left us when one came out of nowhere, precipitating a cascade of fish into the air around us, and struck the raft a staggering blow. It threw me off the ropes into the bottom of the raft and Ericsson, as he had in the first attack, saved himself from going overboard only by hanging on grimly to the ropes.

Four big sharks, all more than ten feet long, were now loose among the school of fish concentrated under and immediately around the raft. One after another the sharks ripped into the fish. They came in very fast, turning over so that we caught glimpses of their white bellies as they lunged among the scattering fish. They didn't trouble to avoid the raft. They didn't even seem to see it. On a dozen occasions we were tilted at an angle of about forty-five degrees as a shark, and sometimes two or three together, hit us.

We slashed and hacked at them with the paddles as they attacked, but they kept on coming back. I swung at one and missed and belted again, bringing down the paddle heavily on its back. It lashed with its tail and knocked the raft feet across the water.

Ericsson cried out at a great ripping under his feet, and the

head of a shark came into the raft, two feet from us. I jabbed at it with the end of the paddle and all the while Ericsson was hitting at it too. Another lunge, I felt, would bring the brute right through the raft and send us into the water.

But, thank God, it sank back and out and away.

A hole big enough for a man to fall through was now right under our feet and the canvas trailed in strips. A second shark hit the bottom of the canvas and we had another large hole.

We were afraid now to put our feet near the canvas for fear that the sharks would get them. But sitting on the edge with our feet upon the ropes was too unstable and every shudder of the raft threatened to take us overboard and into the sea. The sharks were so strong. The raft weighed at least a hundred pounds, more than three hundred, in fact, when our combined weights were added, but the sharks tossed it about like a cork.

For an hour there was no moment of peace. Sharks came at the fish again and again. They were on all sides and beneath us. Scores of fish leapt into the raft during these attacks. Even in the lulls that were never really lulls, because then when the sharks were down deep we knew they were preparing to attack again, the water boiled with fish, leaping and jumping around us.

Once during a "lull" I killed six small fish that were struggling on the lifejackets and ropes inside the raft and rolled them up inside a jacket. If we got through the attack, I thought, we might eat some of the raw fish.

I must give Ericsson the credit for getting us out of this spot. We both knew, more or less, though it did little to ease our fears, that the sharks were after the fish and not us.

Unfortunately we were shade and apparent protection for the fish and they swarmed under and all around us, congregating in heaps for the sharks to attack. Dispersed by the fury of an assault they would hurry back again when the sharks went down. When we saw the utter futility of our own efforts with the paddles Ericsson suggested that we would do better by attacking the fish. It was a wonderful idea. We splashed at

them with our paddles with the desperation of our great fear. We beat and splashed and yelled. "Go away, you swine, go away!" We paddled the raft for a few yards and whacked at the fish as they followed us. And slowly we beat them off.

Three times while we were getting rid of the fish the sharks came back and put us in the middle of the battle again, but gradually the numbers of fish diminished until there were no longer enough with us to make it worth while for the sharks.

When it was over we lay back gasping and exhausted. My eyes ached and my mouth had no drop of moisture. My temples and heart throbbed. I couldn't move. I was done.

For a long time we lay there, recovering our strength and our courage. The sharks were still about. We could see them circling. If they'd attacked then they would have had us. When I felt better I took two of the small fish I'd killed and cleaned them. I cut the flesh into strips and offered half to Ericsson. It didn't taste good. We were hungry and with some water the fish would have been all right. Now we were so dry after fighting the sharks it was all we could do to swallow even the smallest pieces.

It was my idea and I persisted, cleaning two more fish, but most of these and the other two we couldn't eat.

When we threw the remains overboard there was a great flurry of fish and we were afraid the sharks would attack again.

"How will we sleep tonight after all this?" Ericsson asked. "I'll be terrified all the time that they will come back."

I felt the same way. In the corners of the raft we still had some unused coils of rope and I wanted to take these and make a meshing of ropes, stretching them over the full length of the raft.

"We'll be four or five inches above the lousy swine then," I said. "It will be safe sleeping like that."

But Ericsson was tired. "Tomorrow. Let's leave it till tomorrow. Now I'm too tired."

Night came peacefully. It was calm and cool after the heat

and exhaustion of the day. Long silver fish jumped around us and crowds of flying fish went off into the darkness. We could hear the splutter as they left the water and the far-off splash as they landed.

Now I was too lazy to move when Ericsson, relaxed after his rest, took up my suggestion that we should extend our bed of ropes.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," I echoed him.

The moon was rising later as the days went by and it was dark when we lay down again. In only a few minutes we were both asleep. The strain on our nerves and on our ebbing reserves of strength had been great. I was vaguely conscious that my heart was beating faster and louder than usual and attributed it to the events of the afternoon.

Neither of us stirred until we were awakened by the heavy splashing of water two or three hours before dawn. I thought we were being attacked by the sharks again and it was only when I was fully awake that I realized that the splashes came not from the sea but from the sky. It was raining.

We wanted all the water we could get. I tried again to catch some in my cap but found it useless. Ericsson was much more successful with the water-bottle. He had given up the idea of trying to collect water in the wide neck, but instead formed a sort of bowl with the side of the bottle. This way he caught quite a lot. When the rain filled his bowl with about half a cup of water he gulped it down and handed the bottle to me. In a few minutes the dent was filled again and this time I sucked it down. The water tasted of rubber but it was wonderful. I could feel my strength returning. There was saliva in my mouth again and I could talk without strain. The tight, constricted feeling in my throat disappeared. I felt no longer that I was going to choke.

Ericsson had the second drink, I the third and so we went on. We had about ten big mouthfuls each. It was sixty hours since we had tasted water and our systems had dried up. The rain lasted for about an hour and when it ended and the clouds

TEN SHARKS AND A DYING MAN

THE sharks had the scent. They'd marked down their target and were preparing to attack. They swam against the sides of the raft and underneath, coming up immediately under me in long sweeping runs that left trails of bubbles behind.

They weren't in a hurry. Their target was here and they were looking simply for the best way to get at it. This time it was not the fish they were after. Those other times—they seemed months ago—when the sharks came they wanted the fish that then swarmed beneath the raft. It was our bad luck that the raft happened to be in the way, a concentration point for the fish that foolishly sought in its shadow a sanctuary that didn't exist.

Now even the "pilot" had left us and the sprats and the four-inchers and quarter-pounders which for seven days had been with me in the raft. There was nothing here but the sharks and the raft, Ericsson's body and I. They were not after fish.

I wondered how long this preparation had taken. How many times they had negotiated the raft and gone by, striking it, perhaps, as I slept? I had little hope against ten sharks. I waited with my right hand on one of the paddles, my left clutching one of the rope cross-pieces. Underneath me, in a fold of the lifejackets, were the plastic bag and water-bottle, my only links with hope and life. Without them I should die as surely as if the sharks got me.

They circled the raft like soldiers moving cautiously against

a fort. For a minute, maybe five, the sea was quiet. The sun, high overhead, burnt down from the cloudless blue sky. No breeze touched the water and there was no swell and only the slightest movement beyond the raft for as far as I could see.

The sharks were very quiet, waiting. Close by were three of the largest, and I knew they would start the attack. There were four others, barely moving as they cruised in a wide circle well beyond the raft. Deep below, through the raft, were the others.

I didn't see the first blow, only the big shark as it flashed white past the side of the raft, leaving the metal floats ringing. In all the awful moments before when Ericsson and I had staved off the sharks there was never such a blow as this. It was staggering and I don't know now how I saved myself.

It was an experiment in force against the main defences of the raft, an effort to break in one blow my little stronghold that for three weeks and four days had defied the seas and the storms and the sharks. Now it was meeting its most serious challenge.

The reconnaissance was over. I'd just recovered from the first blow when another shark attacked. He came along the top of the water, going very fast, with his fin cutting a wide wake. He struck under the float with his head and the raft cleared the water and I had a blurred vision of the beastly square head, brown going into white. Another rushed from below and turned to savage the metal.

He hit a glancing blow and the speed with which he came carried him forward and into the air and I could see two feet of his glistening carcase above water.

A torrent of spray fell over me and I shut my eyes when the water came and opened them slowly, expecting to find the shark had landed inside the raft. Now all around the water was torn and threshed. I counted the blows as they hit and lost count and closed my eyes again to shut out the despair and horror of it all.

A fin was coming nearer and nearer in a wide circling

motion. All the time I watched the fin, every second. It disappeared and now it was a shape coming up at the raft, brown and fast and white. I heard the canvas strips at the bottom give way and the tearing of the ropes. A shark was in the raft. Its ugly head stuck up above the level of the floats and I hit it with frenzied terror. I struck it with the blade of the paddle, jabbing for its eye, its brown eye that was so close to mine. Four times I hit it as it struggled in the mesh of ropes, caught by its shovel head. It was like hitting solid bone and my hands and arms jarred. The paddle would break but I didn't care. I hit again and again and the ropes snapped and flew apart like bands of rubber. I hit with hate and horror and anger. For this moment I was beyond fear. I found a strength I hadn't known for weeks. But I wasn't hurting the shark. Even when I hit its eye the shark wasn't hurt. But it went down through the broken ropes and into the sea and back again against the side.

Now I was spent and horribly afraid. What more could I do? A dying man can't fight sharks. I got back into the corner of the raft, clutching my lifejacket and my bottle and the bag. There was too much upheaval about me to see the sharks now. The water boiled and foamed and I couldn't tell what was happening. Only now and then I glimpsed a brown shape in the white foam as one came through the water and smashed against the raft. The floats quivered with the blows and I knew that even the stoutest raft could not survive this battering. It would fall apart and I would be with the sharks in the churning water.

Once I saw a shark go way up out of the water, off beyond the raft. A leap like that ending in the raft itself will end it all, I thought. That is how it will end.

But the sharks had different plans and while some went for the sides, others came up from the bottom against the canvas. This was even more terrifying than the side attacks. They shot up against me into the four feet square of canvas and water that was my home, jostling Ericsson's body and

sometimes taking some of it before they fell back into the sea. They were getting more expert.

I saw them begin their dives with tails up and watched them as they shot back. Sometimes they hit the sides as they came but now more and more they were coming through the bottom of the raft. I couldn't move or call out. I was paralysed.

Sometimes there were two heads in the raft at the same time, angry heads, trying to get free. The raft jumped and tossed and I couldn't move. I couldn't pray. I could think of nothing but the unspeakable horror, the madness that went on around me. The heads went down through the raft into the water and I forced myself to think. I couldn't survive unless I did something. By now the canvas bottom was ripped to shreds. Nothing remained but a strip, four inches wide, going one way and two of a similar width going the opposite way. Half the ropes in the raft had gone and soon there would be a square of metal and nothing in between.

The sharks were after Ericsson, not me. I knew that I couldn't keep him any longer. I was surprised that he had stayed on the raft so long. The sharks had hit him many times as they came through the raft. The ropes were broken and full of holes where he lay; in my corner they were almost intact. I had to get the body out of the raft. I had to. It was the only hope I had. The sharks were circling when I decided to make another effort to push the body overboard. And the raft was steady, so that I could crawl on my hands and knees across the ropes to Ericsson. I was fearful that I might slip through the broken ropes into the sea.

I knelt over the body with one knee close to the side of the raft, the other resting on two sound pieces of rope. I tried to move the body by the belt, but though the middle came up I hadn't the strength to raise the head and feet. Urged on by the desperation of my fear I took the head by the hair and it came away in my hand. I wanted to cry with frustration. Any minute, any second, the sharks would be back.

Before they returned I had to have the body overboard and

then they wouldn't worry me any more. I pushed and tugged, took hold of the feet and jerked them over the edge of the raft. Now they stuck out over the water and the sharks began to gather again. I thought they would come and take the legs, which were just above the water, and that, when I pushed, together we would get the body from the raft.

But they seemed determined to get into the raft and came back underneath and I heard the ropes go and saw more sharks come in. One had a little sucker fish clinging to its neck.

If I could get the body through the holes in the ropes the sharks would go away. But though the damage to the ropes was a constant danger to me there were still enough cross-pieces under the body to prevent me from getting it through. The sharks had broken Ericsson's flesh where it sagged in the water but they couldn't take him away and it made them mad. They attacked time after time and I pushed and struggled, clinging to the sides of the raft as they hit around me. Their jaws were up close to me in the raft itself, or just beyond the thin metal of the floats close to which I was now lying. I'd survived miraculously so far. But I couldn't expect my luck to hold much longer. The sharks were going for everything now, ripping and tearing at the rope-grips along the outside of the raft, lashing at the ropes inside. Soon there would be nothing but the ring of floats. When that happened they would get the body and it would be impossible for me to stay in the raft when they took it.

Desperately I struggled with the body, one moment trying to get it through the bottom of the raft, the next pushing to roll it over the side. Rolling was the best method. Kneeling on three of the surviving strands of knotted rope I got my hands under the side of the body and slowly levered it nearer the edge. To get it up and over was beyond me, but by holding on tight I managed to stop it rolling back again. I was in this position when the sharks hit us again. They would take me from underneath before I could get the body over. There were so few ropes left now and when they all went I would be

unable to perch on the floats. Then it would be all over. I heaved and lifted, just a few inches up and I would have it over.

The sharks came underneath the raft. I felt it tilting high in the air, up and over. Here was my chance. As we poised at this awful angle I gave a final despairing heave and the body of my friend balanced on the edge and rolled into the sea.

Though many weeks have passed the nightmare of the next few minutes is with me still in all its horror. They got Ericsson within a yard of the raft as he floated on the top of the water, and fighting among themselves, lashing and churning, they took him away. I couldn't move. I sat on the side of the raft, worn out and horrified, and clasped my hands.

“Our Father, Which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name . . .
. . . Thy Will be done . . .”

I remembered a prayer I had heard long ago in Poland, and as the sharks took my friend away I whispered what I knew of it to him:

“Dust thou art, and unto dust return.
The Lord Jesus Christ raise you up . . .
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of
The Holy Ghost. Amen.”