Book Review

438 Days: An Extraordinary True Story of Survival at Sea

Jonathan Franklin

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\$26, 266 pages, clothbound

This book recounts the amazing survival story of Salvador Alvarenga, a man from El Salvador who spent 14 months adrift on the Pacific Ocean, the longest time anyone is known to have survived lost at sea. Alvarenga and a crew mate were longline fishing off Costa Azul, Mexico, on November 17, 2012, in a 25-foot, canoe-shaped, open-hull *panga* with a 75-horsepower outboard motor when a storm hit, setting them adrift with no possessions but a broken motor, ice chest, and knife. Alvarenga's mate died of dehydration and malnutrition after 3 months, but Alvarenga survived to land in the Marshall Islands, 9000 miles away on January 29, 2014.

The book is fascinating, despite its sometimes lackluster prose. The narrative details how Alvarenga gathered food and water, dodged sunburn, treated an ear infection with a urine lavage, avoided capsizing, attempted to

sleep, bathed himself, and cured constipation from a diet of bird bones and feathers by eating shark liver, a natural laxative. Water came from tropical rainstorms, stockpiled in scores of plastic bottles and a large bucket, which he scavenged from the floating garbage he frequently encountered. Food came from fish hand plucked from the sea, turtles, and birds. He would capture birds by hand, break their wings, and stockpile them alive in a corner of the boat. Alvarenga would eat everything, sometimes grinding bird bones into a powder to be mixed into a paste. Strips of fish or bird flesh were sometimes warmed by the sun and salted with seawater. Mostly it was consumed raw. Nutrient-rich sea turtle blood was a life-saving delicacy. Perhaps the only detail missing from the story is how Alvarenga defecated.

438 Days is a worthy read for those interested in human endurance. The open ocean is an inhospitable place, but Alvarenga found it to be surprisingly rich in resources.

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