

Beyond the Waves: A Journey to Faith



by Jerry Gist

The day was clear and calm, sunlight stretching across the South China Sea, golden rays dancing on gentle waves at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. The scent of salt hung in the air, and the sun's warmth soaked into my skin. Brad and I, craving peace, grabbed inner tubes from the motor pool, laughing as we hauled them to the beach. The sky stretched above, sand beneath, hours of freedom unfolded.

We waded into the water, hoisting the enormous black rings. Drifting out, two guys on day-leave, we let the tide carry us as we talked about the war and home. The ocean cradled us, its rhythm soothing, as the shore faded into the distance.

A stronger swell nudged me off balance, and I realized how far we'd drifted. I glanced at Brad; our shared look said it all: the tide was pulling us farther into the vast sea. Panic stirred. I tried to paddle, but the inner tube resisted, offering no leverage. Brad, taller and stronger, began making headway toward shore. His eyes met mine, filled with hesitation. "Bring help," I said, forcing strength into my voice. He hesitated, then nodded, his strokes steady as he began his journey back.

I watched his figure shrink into the horizon, the weight of isolation pressing on me. Alone, I clung to the tube, the waves rising beneath me. My arms burned, and every attempt to move seemed futile. The shore became a cruel mirage. Exhaustion gnawed at me, and despair crept in.

In the depth of my struggle, a plea escaped my lips: "God, I need Your help. Save me!" The words erupted from deep within me—raw and unfiltered—as though my soul spoke where my body had failed. I didn't know if anyone—or anything—was listening, but crying out felt like my only hope.

The change wasn't immediate, but undeniable. The waves felt less hostile. A thought surfaced: **Stretch out on the tube. Face the shore. Paddle deliberately.** It wasn't profound, but it was enough. Slowly, I repositioned myself and began the awkward process of paddling. Stroke by stroke, I fought the tide, each move fueled by a quiet determination that didn't feel entirely my own.

The shore grew closer. The faint murmur of waves breaking on the sand became tangible, pulling me forward. My feet brushed the sandy bottom, and relief surged through me. I released the tube and collapsed onto the sand.

When I looked up, Brad was there, arms crossed, a faint grin on his face. “I knew you could do it,” he said lightly. I stared at the endless blue sky, his presence fading into the background as my thoughts gripped the enormity of my survival. It wasn’t Brad’s faith or my own determination. It was something far greater. It was God—and, and what was I to do with this realization?

That night, back at my hooch, I puzzled over the day. I stood outside, the stillness of the darkness wrapping around me, watching the full moon climb above the hillside. Its silver light spilled across the landscape. Chester Wingate, the Chaplain’s assistant, appeared beside me. “It’s comforting to know,” he said, “that the God who created this moon also watches over us.” His words lingered, carrying a promise I wasn’t ready to grasp.

It would take years—and the unwavering love of the woman of faith who would become my wife—for that promise to take root. But it all began here, in the South China Sea, where I learned surrender isn’t defeat—it’s the beginning of faith and the beginning of everything that matters.