



## JOHN CAPES

### The survivor no one believed (Greece, 1941)

During the Second World War submarine crews faced many dangers while on patrol in the Mediterranean. The subs were often unreliable and the clear water made it hard for them to hide from low-flying aircraft or vessels passing

overhead. Hunted day and night by enemy ships and frequently bombed from the air, the men who ventured into the seas of southern Europe found themselves under almost constant threat of attack.

In December 1941 HMS *Perseus*, a Royal Navy sub, was travelling from Malta to Alexandria in Egypt. The neatly bearded John Capes was a member of the crew and held the rank of leading stoker. This meant he was one of the mechanics responsible for keeping the engines working, a job involving routine maintenance as well as sustaining a reliable fuel supply for the submarine's diesel generators.

*Perseus* had surfaced a few miles from the Greek island of Kefalonia; her captain was taking advantage of the darkness to recharge the batteries for the following day's patrol. As the sub came under attack, thirty-one-year-old

Capes was lying on a makeshift bunk converted from an empty torpedo tube.

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When he felt the force of a huge explosion it was obvious to him that they'd struck an enemy mine. As an experienced sailor, he wasn't surprised when the sub immediately began to sink.

*Perseus* came to rest on the seabed moments later. Capes was unhurt, and so far there was no sign of water pouring into his compartment. However, in those days it was virtually impossible to get out alive from a stricken submarine, which Capes would have known. Besides the risk of drowning, the pressure in deep water was enough to crush anyone who left the protective hull of the vessel. Records show that, in nearly six years of war, there were only four successful escapes

from British submarines lying damaged on the ocean floor.

The lights went out a few seconds after the sub hit the bottom. Plunged into darkness, Capes was then thrown violently out of his bunk and across the cabin. Moments later the submarine began filling with freezing, filthy water. Pulling himself up off the floor, he shone a torch around. In the thin beam the shocked sailor could make out the corpses of several shipmates. He was also aware of creaks and leakages in the submarine's structure, alarming evidence of damage from the huge pressure of the water now surrounding it.

Capes tried to move along the submarine, but the first hatch he tried to open was jammed shut. This could have been caused by the pressure of the water, damage from the blast or the impact of the sub hitting the bottom. Forcing it open would be impossible, so he quickly turned back the other way. When he came across three of his fellow stokers he detected faint signs of life. Pausing to grab four sets of the navy's standard-issue submarine escape apparatus, he courageously dragged the men one by one towards another escape hatch.

Capes worked frantically to fit the apparatus onto his confused, semi-conscious shipmates, but the air was beginning to run out and he was now struggling to breathe. The escape apparatus – including buoyancy bag, oxygen bottle, mouthpiece and goggles – was designed to keep the user alive as they swam to the surface. Attaching this kit was tricky at the best of times, but with no help from the injured men it was desperately difficult. Holding the torch between his teeth, Capes did the best he could before pulling on his own apparatus and taking a vital gulp of life-saving oxygen.

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According to Royal Navy regulations the escape apparatus was officially rated for use at one hundred feet below sea level, but the submarine's instruments now showed *Perseus* lying at almost three times this depth. No one had ever escaped from such a depth before, but Capes had no time to worry about this. He still needed to find a way out before he could begin to ponder whether or not he might reach the surface alive.

The strong steel hatches on submarines can be opened only when the pressure is equal on both sides. To reach this state the submarine needs

to be flooded, meaning that Capes had to endure several nerve-shredding moments as the water around him rose up to his chin, his eyes and then over his head. It was only when the water reached right up to the

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hatch that he was able to twist the damaged levers and release it, giving it a massive shove to force it open.

With the hatch pushed back as far as it would go, Capes had only a few seconds to manhandle his comrades through the aperture before following them out. Incredibly, he found time to take a quick glug of rum for courage, and then all he could do was pray that he could reach the surface in time. His concerns were that his air supply would run out or his chest and lungs might collapse from the immense pressure of the deep water.

Fortunately, once clear of the submarine, his body's natural buoyancy propelled him to the surface at great speed. In just over a minute the cool



night air hit his face: he had made it. The relief must have been intense, but so was the pain. Capes felt dizzy as the blood rushed to his head, and his lungs seemed to scream out for clean, fresh air. At the same time his body felt as though it had been ripped open by the force of rising through the water so rapidly.

He was frightened too, realising that he was alone in the middle of the cold, dark sea. There was no light to see anything by, and he couldn't hear anything either, except the lapping of the water and the sound of his breathing. There was no sign of the other three stokers, which meant that Capes was the sole survivor of the fifty-nine officers and men on board HMS *Perseus*.

As his heartbeat gradually returned to normal and his eyesight adjusted to the dark he could see pinpricks of light on the distant shore. He still had the torch and tried using it to flash an SOS message in the direction of Kefalonia. The island was occupied by enemy troops. They were mostly Italian but included around two thousand Germans. Capes would have known that he might be taken prisoner, but unless someone came to find him he would have to swim the considerable distance to the shore.

For the next five or six hours he slowly paddled his way towards the beach. It was getting light now and from a few hundred feet offshore he thought he saw a sentry surveying the horizon. He was lucky enough to reach the beach without being spotted, then quickly found a small cave to hide in and recover his strength.

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His second lucky break came later that morning when two fishermen from a nearby village entered the cave, where they stored their nets. Surprised to find someone hiding there, they returned an hour or so later with food and dry clothes. Unable to speak English, and with Capes speaking no Greek, they gestured that they would wait until dark before attempting to smuggle him somewhere safer.

Exhausted by his narrow escape, he was taken inland and spent two weeks recuperating in a small village. Not everyone there trusted him, and many thought he might be a spy, but others kept him fed and watered and hid him whenever enemy soldiers came to search the area. When he felt fit enough to travel they lent him a donkey, but only on condition that he wouldn't kill it for food. He was also advised to dye his hair and beard black before leaving, to make himself appear a bit more like the locals.

If Capes were caught he would almost certainly be shot, so he travelled mostly by night. He spent more than a year moving from one small village to the next, trying to stay one jump ahead of the Italian search parties that regularly patrolled the countryside.

Everywhere he went he was hidden by courageous Greeks, ordinary families by harbouring an English sailor. Most of them were very generous and shared their food, although the war meant there was not much to spare and he gradually lost a lot of weight.

It was May 1943 before the stick-thin Capes was finally able to get off the island. One night, under cover of darkness, he was smuggled out

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in a fishing boat. With the assistance of the Royal Navy, and travelling a roundabout route via Turkey, he finally made it to Alexandria, the submarine's intended destination.

Unfortunately, after all this, no one believed he had even been on the *Perseus*! Capes had a reputation as a lively and enthusiastic storyteller, and the details tended to change slightly each time he told his tale. This, and the fact that no one had ever escaped from such a depth before, meant many of

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his fellow sailors thought he had made up the whole thing. They knew about the tragic loss of HMS *Perseus*, but none of them could explain how he could have got to enemy-occupied Kefalonia from Malta. His version seemed so far-fetched that no one was prepared to

take his word for it.

Before the end of the war Capes was awarded the British Empire Medal, but even when he died forty years later not everyone thought he deserved it. For the next decade his story was more or less forgotten, but then a group of divers made a remarkable discovery when they located the wreck of the *Perseus*. On board they found the depth gauge, the first hatch jammed closed, the remains of his makeshift bunk, and even the bottle of rum from which Capes had taken that final fortifying swig.

Scraping the glass clear of more than half a century of seaweed and grime, one of the divers also saw that the gauge was still reading 270 feet, exactly as the old sailor had always said it would. Confirmation came

too late for John Capes, but today, at last, the submariner's supposedly impossible escape is rightly regarded as one of the most extraordinary survival stories of the entire war.