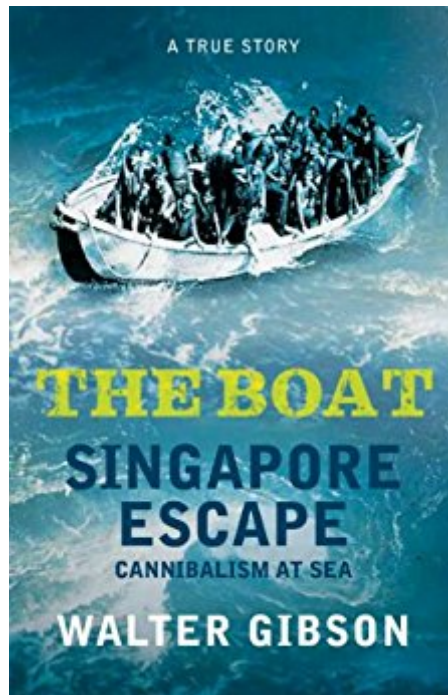




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The Boat: Singapore Escape, Cannibalism At Sea



Synopsis

In 1942 a ship carrying 500 escapees from Japanese-occupied Singapore set sail for Ceylon. Halfway to safety she was torpedoed and sank. Only one lifeboat was launchedâ "a lifeboat built to carry twenty-eight but to which 135 souls now looked to for salvation. For twenty-six days, cannibalism, murder, heroism, and self-sacrifice drifted with her. There were only four survivors.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This was a quick read and a very interesting story about Walter Gibson's survival at sea after the ship evacuating him were sunk. It covers his 26 days on the life-boat where he is one of 4 survivors out of 135 which started out on the life-boat, and the few weeks after coming ashore before being captured by the Japanese and briefly his time as a POW. The time on the boat is truly remarkable and details events of the best and worst in humanity while trying to survive. I also enjoyed the end part in the Kindle edition where he covers his escape after the Battle of Slim River and leading up to his evacuation from Padang. He was a true survivor!!

For starters, half of the book is about "The Boat". Cannibalism is mentioned once. The very

misleading title had me expecting a long term "survival by eating people" story. Not the case. The second half of the book was about the things that happened after reaching shore. None of which was super interesting to read. It wasn't a total waste of time, but definitely NOT what I was expecting.

Walter Gibson was a Scotsman who joined the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders regiment of the British Army in 1929, when he was only fifteen years old. He was with the regiment on the Malay Peninsula when Japan invaded at the start of WW2. At the Battle of Slim River, the regiment was routed, and most of its remnant made for Singapore. Gibson did not go to Singapore, however. He made it to the coast, and then to Sumatra, where he, along with many others fleeing the Japanese advance, boarded the Dutch ship *Roseboom* in Padang, bound for Ceylon in the Indian Ocean. A couple of days out of Padang, *Roseboom* was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine, and sunk. A single life boat was launched. The lifeboat, designed for 28 people, now held 80. 135 others were in the water nearby. Attrition set in. The survivors' numbers dwindled steadily, due to thirst, hunger and exposure to what Gibson calls, "...that brassy, burning, blazing horror: the sun." For the next few weeks, the boat drifted slowly eastward. Meanwhile, those aboard the boat experienced the extremes of human behavior, both good and evil, that manifest in such a dire situation. After twenty-six days, only Gibson, a Chinese woman named Doris Lim, and two Javanese crewmen were still alive when the lifeboat ran aground on the island of Sipora, only about 100 miles from Padang. Gibson goes on to tell about the ensuing weeks on the island, and his eventual capture by the Japanese. There is also a chronological digression where Gibson recounts the fate of his regiment after Slim River and how he made his way to Padang before *Roseboom* sailed. The real story, though, is about the lifeboat and the cast of characters therein. The time in the lifeboat occupies only 65 pages of an already short book of 121 pages, but it is compelling reading, regardless of what broader topics might interest the reader. Those interested in further reading about what happens aboard a lifeboat should read Owen Chase's *Wreck of the Whaleship Essex*.

There are many literary accounts of people fighting for their life in the most extreme situations. I'd say this belongs to the most ultimate category. Basically it's a sea story, but the writer also tells about the ordeals he went through on an escape march through the Singapore jungles - before his ill fated voyage ends up in a lifeboat of a torpedoed ship, in the Indian Ocean. After the gruesome weeks of fighting for one's life, the writer's purgatory-like experiences continue in a Japanese prison camp. The laconic and barren style with what the story is told can be seen as amateurish writing.

On the other hand, the whole account is so utterly grim that this kind of writing kind of suits it. Considering the events described in the book, one wonders how it all can be contained in a mere one hundred pages. This could easily have been a book of some 250-300 pages. However, if you're interested to read how far a man's endurance and will to live goes, you better read this one.

I may be a little prejudiced in my attachment to this book: my parents knew Doris Lim in Shanghai before she and they were forced to flee from the advancing Japanese army, my father to Hong Kong with B. F. Goodrich, my mother to Manila, where it was considered safer for her to deliver her baby--me. There, my mother again came across Doris, who arrived there among many other refugees enroute to a safer haven. My mother, though very pregnant at the time, shared her hotel bed with Doris (for a few days, I believe) before Doris left. We have a photo of a dinner party seated at a large table, at which also sat my mother and Doris. When my parents first heard about this book (in 1963, I believe), they immediately bought it--it was the first that they learned what had happened to their friend Doris after she left Manila. So the events seemed somehow personal to me. However, if you are at all attracted to very human stories about what happens to individuals in wartime, when the social contract gets utterly rent, you'll find this book an absorbing read.

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