

13 year-old boy saves his family at sea

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Story summary

Austin Appelbee, a teenager in Western Australia, survived a terrifying four-hour swim after he and his family were swept out to sea near Quindalup.

With no way to return to shore, his mother made the painful decision to send Austin to find help as darkness approached.

Austin swam about four kilometres through strong waves, abandoning a damaged kayak and even removing his life jacket when it slowed him down. He later told the news media that prayer, Christian songs, and thoughts of his family kept him going.

“I don’t think it was me who did it — it was God the whole time,” he said. “I kept praying and praying, and I said to God, ‘I’ll get baptized, I’ll get baptized.’”

After collapsing on shore and calling for help, Austin learned hours later that his mother and siblings were rescued alive after drifting nearly 14 kilometres offshore.

How it began

The drama in the ocean off Western Australia’s south-west coast last Friday was in stark contrast to how the Appelbees’ morning had started.

The young family had finished packing their gear after holidaying at Club Wyndham resort, but decided on a final paddle before heading home to Gidgegannup, hiring a kayak and two paddle boards from the hotel.

They booked a two-hour session from 10am to 12pm and, after covering themselves in sun screen and putting on life jackets, they headed into the ocean at about 11am. While the water “seemed nice and calm to begin with,” conditions gradually deteriorated.

At first it was Austin who struggled against the strengthening current on a paddle board, and as Joanne tried to guide him back to the beach, her board flipped and she lost a paddle. 12-year-old brother Beau then tried to tow them both in with the kayak, but in the chaos the second paddle got lost and the kayak began taking on water. As the current dragged them further from shore, Austin traded with Beau and attempted to paddle them to safety, but was no match for the unrelenting conditions.

Lost in a wild ocean and drifting further out to sea, Joanne made an unfathomable life-or-death decision. As she clung to a blow-up paddleboard with her two terrified youngest children, she yelled out to her oldest boy — 13-year-old Austin — who was battling the elements next to them on a plastic kayak. The four were powerless against the growing swell and, despite several hours of paddling, they continued being dragged further out to sea. She

realised if the four of them were to survive, Austin was their only hope. Between 1.30pm and 2pm, Joanne made that heart-wrenching decision to see if Austin could make his way back to shore to save them all.

“One of the hardest decisions I’ve ever had to make was to say to Austin, ‘try and get to shore to get some help’, because it was getting serious really quickly,” she recalled.

And so Austin did what his mother asked. He turned for the coastline leaving his mum, Beau, and little sister, Grace, eight, clinging to plastic paddleboards as the howling offshore wind took them further out towards the horizon. But as he started paddling, his mother wondered if she’d ever see him again.

For the next four hours as she and her two youngest children struggled to survive the whipping winds and wild ocean, Joanne was tormented by whether she had made the right decision.

“As the sun went down I thought, ‘something’s gone terribly wrong here’, and my fear was that Austin didn’t make it . . . everything goes through your head,” she said.

Despite his determination, the wind and the waves were doing Austin no favours.

“I knew it would be a long way, but the kayak kept taking on water,” he said. “I was fighting rough seas, the kayak dumped me a million times, I thought I saw something in the water and I was really scared but I was just thinking I was going to make it.”

After about two hours, he decided to discard the kayak and shortly after, took the life jacket off too. Austin rotated between survival backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle for the next two hours, and did what he could to occupy his mind with happy thoughts.

“I was thinking about all my friends at school, and friends of my Christian Youth, and I just said, ‘not today,’” he said.

Eventually he made it to shore near Toby’s Inlet, two kilometres up the sand from where they set off. He said his legs “collapsed” once he touched solid ground, but he quickly sprung to action again, sprinting as best he could all the way back to the hotel where, at about 6pm, he used his mum’s phone to call triple-0.

“I said, ‘I need helicopters, I need planes, I need boats. My family’s out at sea’.

Out in the ocean Joanne had been trying to keep Beau and Grace entertained by singing and making jokes, but morale began to slip as night fell.

“As it got darker I thought, ‘there’s no one coming to save us,’” she recalled. “We were cold, we were shaking, and it was pretty terrifying for a while, then I lost my glasses, so I couldn’t see.”

Back on shore, as the rescue efforts got underway and time passed with no news, Austin began to fear the worst.

“I called Dad and was bawling, I finally realised that they were gone. I thought they were dead,” he said.

“I didn’t know where they were and how they were, and I thought they were dead. I had a lot of guilt in my heart because I thought I wasn’t fast enough.”

About five minutes later, he received a call saying his mum and siblings had been found.

“I thought it was fake. I didn’t believe it. I was really happy, but I couldn’t process it,” he said.

Joanne was equally ecstatic to learn Austin had made it to shore safely, having earlier been unsure if it was him or the hotel that alerted authorities.

“We were extremely proud,” Joanne said. “I’m speechless . . . to keep going for so long, he’s absolutely amazing,” she beamed.

The teenager had also earned high praise from his little brother.

“I’m proud of him. He normally struggles doing 350 metres, so about four kilometres is impressive, and I can’t be more proud of him as a younger brother,” Beau said.

Naturaliste Volunteer Marine Rescue commander Paul Bresland and skipper Dan Crosbie were part of the multi-agency rescue mission involving the Water Police Coordination Centre in North Fremantle, South West Police, local marine rescue groups and the RAC rescue helicopter.

At about 8.40pm, the helicopter spotted the family, which by then had drifted 7.9 nautical miles (approximately 14km) out to sea.

Mr Bresland was on a nearby Marine Rescue Busselton boat at the time and followed helicopter advice to locate the family.

“There was a tense wait when the chopper asked what the condition of the patients was, and when they said they were responsive . . . it was just ‘how good is this?’, he said.

But minutes before the rescue, the situation took a distressing turn when a big wave hit the family, separating them.

“I could only hear Grace screaming. I couldn’t hear Beau, and that scared me,” Joanne said.

“When the boat came and picked me up, I screamed that there were two kids in the water.

“I called out for Grace and I could hear her, and then all of a sudden, I heard this other voice (Beau). We picked them up and it was the best feeling in the world.”

The family received first aid onboard before being transferred to ambulances and later Busselton Health Campus for medical assessment.

In the aftermath, they spoke to Austin’s dad and remarked that he “must be a strong swimmer”.

“He said ‘they just finished VacSwim and he failed,’” Mr Bresland said.

Aside from blistering, swelling and muscle pain, the family managed to avoid injuries.

Sore from the muscle pain, Austin attended school on Monday to share his incredible tale in a wheelchair. He has since swapped the wheelchair for support crutches and was ecstatic when his bravery scored him an invite to meet his favourite AFL team, the West Coast Eagles.

The family have extended their immense gratitude to the multi-agency rescue mission involving the Water Police Coordination Centre in North Fremantle, South West police, local marine rescue groups and the RAC Rescue helicopter.

Questions

1. Where did event take place?
2. Describe the water activity that the family was involved in.
3. How did Joanne feel about making the decision to send Austin for help?
4. Why did Austin abandon the kayak and the life jacket?
5. What kept Austin going?
6. How do we know that Austin was not usually a strong swimmer?
7. What unfortunate event happened minutes before the rescue?
8. Write a response to this true event. How does it make you feel? In what way does it strengthen or challenge your faith?