

The remarkable courage of 13-year-old Austin Appelbee



Austin Applebee and his mother, Joanne (image:BBC)

Australia has been global news for all the wrong reasons. So, it was a relief to hear a story of a boy's courage and heroism in south-western Australia which has won admiration from all around the world.

The coastal waters of Australia are a playground. Swimming, boating, kayaking and fishing are the summer pastimes for millions of Australians. But those same waters are treacherous. Perfectly placid seas can become death traps in a minute.

A recreational kayaker myself, I once almost drowned in Melbourne's Port Philip Bay when a gale struck from nowhere, whipping up vicious, choppy waves that almost capsized me. I barely made it back to safety from just one mile offshore. I was fortunate that I wasn't blown further out into the bay or capsized, because I would never have survived. Others have not been so lucky.

But some have, amazingly so. Last Friday, a 13-year-old boy saved the lives of his family when the sea suddenly turned on them.

Quindalup is a sleepy holiday town about 150 miles south-west from Perth, on the edge of the famous Margaret River wine country. Last week, Irish-born mother Joanne Appelbee, and her three young children were enjoying themselves off the beach there, with a kayak and inflatable paddleboards, ideal for fun in calm waters.

Not, however, for rough conditions. The wind changed and the seas turned from benign pleasure ground to life-threatening maelstrom. The family were swept further out to sea, well away from safety, with only their lifejackets for protection.

When they had been pushed about four kilometres offshore, Joanne realised the family needed help or it was the end for them. Unable to leave her youngest children, she asked

her oldest, 13-year-old Austin, to try to get back to the beach. 'It didn't look as if we were that far from the shoreline', she said afterwards.

Austin agreed to go, initially trying to tow his family on a kayak. But soon that proved impossible, and he and his mother made the hard decision for him to try for the shore alone. I started paddling to shore on the kayak...

but it kept taking on water and I was fighting rough seas and then I thought I saw something in the water, and I was really scared,' he recounted, perhaps knowing that this coastal region is a hunting ground for Great White sharks.

As winds blew harder and the waves choppier, the boy's kayak finally swamped and flipped. In what was an act of great courage, Austin abandoned it and struck out for the shore. A four-kilometre swim in calm water is arduous enough; in those diabolically treacherous conditions, it was next to impossible.

The boy's efforts have been described as 'superhuman' and, for once, that was no exaggeration.

Having never swum more than a few hundred metres at any one time, Austin kept going in open water, battling not only the waves but the current that was taking his family still further out to sea. He ditched the lifejacket that was dragging him back and hampering his swimming. He tried backstroke, breaststroke and freestyle, but he kept going. He encouraged himself by thinking about happy things - Thomas the Tank Engine incongruously came to his mind - his family, friends and his faith.

It must have seemed an eternity to Austin, but after four hours swimming, he made it to shore, touching bottom near where the family had left the beach. But his ordeal wasn't over. He then had to run two kilometres back to the family's accommodation, where he was able to ring 000 (Australia's 999) to raise the alarm.

'I said, "I need helicopters, I need planes, I need boats, my family's out at sea". I was very calm about it', he recalled for Australian television. Fortunately, rescue authorities scrambled a sea and air search and, in the dying light soon after sunset, located Joanne and her other two children clinging for dear life almost eight miles offshore. They were plucked from the sea and brought to safety, counting their blessings just to be alive.

They wouldn't be, but for the courage and determination of a 13-year-old boy who overcame his fears and risked his life to save theirs, defeating odds against his own survival that could have overwhelmed even grown men deeply experienced in the ways of the sea. Superheroes don't always wear capes; this one was spurred on by his love for his family and a calm internal fortitude he never knew he had.

Almost 200 years on, we still recount the heroic story of shipwreck heroine Grace Darling. In that part of coastal Western Australia, at least, the bravery of Austin Appelbee surely will live on.

And, unlike the disgraceful behaviour of some of our so-called great and good this week, young Austin's unexpected bravery is a much-needed reminder that so much of human nature is good and uplifting.

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