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The Day I Became a Hero (almost)

What is a Hero? What does it mean to be truly brave or to show real courage? According to a famous John Wayne quote "Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway." I have often wondered if an act of bravery demonstrated by a person with a complete absence of fear, is truly an act of bravery, or not? Because if one is not afraid, then where is the actual courage, or the sincere bravery? My favorite quote on this subject is by Eddie Rickenbacker (WW-2 Ace Pilot) who stated "Courage is doing what you are afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you are scared." According to the e-dictionary the word courage is defined as: "the ability to do something that frightens one."

Well, let me share a true story with all of you readers out there who may be interested in this story, about a time I was very scared - and did something I was afraid to do. This was the day I became a Hero (with a capital H)– well almost. The year was 2006 and my two grandsons were ages six and four. My wife and I owned an 18-foot pontoon boat that was very, very old (1968) but still managed to run (most of the time) and gave us endless hours of fun in the sun. My wife loved to lay in the sun, and I loved to fish. We both loved our time on the boat and this was surprising considering neither one of us could swim. Well my wife couldn't swim at all, and if I was extremely lucky, I could dog-paddle just well enough to save myself in a pinch.

This year (2006) was our first year at Lake Logan with our old beat-up boat. We had been scared to move the boat here because according to the State of Ohio park brochure this lake (at its deepest point) was in the 25 to 30- foot range. Pretty intimidating numbers for a couple of non-swimmers. Prior to our moving to Lake Logan we had kept the boat docked at Buckeye Lake where most of the water we experienced was never deeper than 5 to 6 feet.

One blistering hot weekend in August my wife and I were baby-sitting our two grandsons. It was a hot day but the breeze off the lake water was still cool. I had given both of my grandsons the opportunity to drive the boat. They couldn't wait to brag to their friends and I was feeling like a super-grandpa. That was the exact moment that the black clouds rolled into the Lake Logan area in a matter of minutes. First came the thunder claps followed by the lightning flashes. We immediately pulled up the anchors and hurriedly pointed the boat toward home (a twenty-minute ride at full throttle).

Next came the winds that made the water murky dark and the waves choppy. I realized that my grip on the boat steering wheel was tight and white-knuckled. The old pontoon boat began to rock precariously left to right. I saw the fear in the faces of my two young grandsons and their large wide eyes. I forced a large grin onto my face and looked my grandsons squarely in their eyes. I shouted above the roar of the buffeting wind "Looks like we are going to get caught in some rain boys, sure hope my hair doesn't get wet!" I was rewarded with a couple of terse grins. After all their grandpa was almost totally bald on top of his head.

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My shouted joke had the desired effect as my grandsons seemed less tense. A quick glance toward my wife showed just how worried she must be. She wasn't even trying to hide her fear from the two young boys, she was clearly scared and deeply worried. When she turned toward the rest of us I saw that she had two life jackets clutched tightly, one in each hand. "You boys come over to me, slowly and carefully, and put these on". My wife looked into my eyes and gave me a look. I knew that look, it said many things to me in an instant. Her beautiful brown eyes were telling me that we only had two vests on board and she was busy securing them to the most valuable cargo on our boat. After thirty years of marriage I read that look. The look said you may fool the young boys with a couple of corny jokes, but I know better. I know you are really worried my husband. I was the one who had not packed extra life-vests. In hindsight, I wish had insisted that the boys wear their vests. However, they both swam like little seals and it hadn't seemed important.

She was right of course. I was seriously worried. Last year during a similar storm, a boat (just like ours) had been swept over the dam and crashed fifty feet below unto the dam's concrete spillway. Fortunately, no one had been hurt because the boat had been empty. It had taken very little time for the wind and choppy waves to hurl the boat over the dam. The storm was coming hard from the west and was creating high, powerful waves. These waves were driving us from the west side of the lake quickly towards the eastside. The east where the dam darkly loomed. The same dam that had already completely destroyed one boat last summer.

I had quickly moved the small outboard motor on our boat to half speed as soon as we spotted the storm. Now that our grandsons were safely cocooned inside of two adult-sized life vests I started to gradually ease the small 9.9 horsepower motor into full gear. It was a race now. Could I reach the small lagoon where our boat was docked before the storm's fury pushed us over the dam? Trying my best to keep the grimness I felt inside from showing on my face I yelled at my scared grandsons "This is going to be more fun than a Cedar Point ride, hang on boys".

The mist from the boat's spray was in my mouth and eyes when the rain finally came in a giant rush. The rain appeared as huge sheets of water that poured unto me and my scared family. After what seemed a lifetime but was probably only twenty minutes I spotted our little cove through the rain sheets just fifty yards or so in front of me. We are going to make it, I thought as my heart began to pound harder. Forty yards, thirty, and then twenty yards to go, just then the wind began to gust directly at our little boat. The 1968 boat motor began to sputter, what is happening? It must be engine trouble (again) probably from that torrential amount of rain water I thought to myself. I heard a final coughing noise and then the motor went completely dead. Oh no I thought, now what, the boat stopped moving forward and unbelievably was being pushed backwards by the strong winds! We were being pushed away from the safety of the cove and toward the dangerous dam spillway. No, I thought this just isn't fair. My wife made eye contact with me and yelled through the wind and rain, "We have to do something – the boys!"

I was the husband, the grandfather, and the man responsible. I was the one in charge, and the proverbial buck stopped with me, this was my mo-

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ment to stand up, be counted, and be the Hero. I waved my wife over and pointed at the boat's steering wheel. "Hold us pointed toward the cove, baby" I yelled trying to keep my voice sounding calm and more confident then I actually felt. "No Tom don't do anything crazy" my wife yelled over the storm, in a shaky voice. I smiled boldly at her and at my two grandsons who were staring and listening intently to everything we were saying. "I'm just going to give our old boat a little push, that's all". My mind was racing madly. If I did nothing, we had poor swimmers, and children, who would have to try and swim to safety. The old boat would eventually be blown over the dam. So, the time to act was now. I walked to the edge of the pontoon boat and waved at my family. "It will be over soon you wait and see" I shouted. The last thing I saw was the worry in my wife's eyes and in the frightened eyes of my grandsons. Multiple last thoughts were whipping through my mind as I dived over the side 1) oh my God please help me, 2) this Lake was 25 to 30 feet deep according to the brochure, 3) I can barely swim, and 4) what the heck was I doing?

I went over head first and my mouth and ears were immediately filled with water and lake plants. Almost too quickly my head was above the water level somehow and it sounded calm. The storm was leaving as quickly as it had started. I heard a strange sound to my right side where the boat was floating. It sounded like – just what was that sound? I know - the mysterious sound was laughter? Yes, it was my grandsons giggling and my beloved wife laughing loudly? What could they find so funny, with me out in the lake depths fighting for my life?

When I looked down I finally understood what they were laughing at. I had jumped head first into the edge of our little cove and landed squarely on lake plants and mud. I was now standing in water about three feet deep up to my waist with my head and upper body dripping lake mud and plants. I must have been a sight so funny that it broke the tension of the summer storm. I purposely didn't clean any of the plants or mud from my upper torso, and I boldly walked over to our ancient boat. I grabbed the rear of the boat and pointed it toward the wooden dock where we stored our boat. I walked it the whole way step-by-step, guiding it straight and true, despite the laughter on the boat, which became louder and louder with each step I planted.

After I had tied off the boat and secured the precious cargo, I simply walked unto the shore. I was glad that my family was safe. However, I part of me was hurt because I suppose I wanted my family to think of me as brave not funny! My wife must have sensed my disappointment because she looked at me fondly and said, "It's okay honey, you will always be my Hero." This helped take away the sting a little, but then she snickered, and my grandsons broke out into loud guffaws.

Well I thought to myself, so much for John Wayne, Eddie Rickenbacker and bravery. I sighed out loud and muttered to myself. Hey, how was I supposed to know that the cove water was three feet deep, I thought it was 30 feet. Today I had become a Hero in the eyes of my family, well almost a Hero. I had just barely missed it by about 27 feet or so – sigh....