

PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Story by Christmas McGaughey



Alex Montenegro: Missionary Rescues Victims

Setting out on his honeymoon last fall, Alex Montenegro could not foresee how God would use his experience as a missionary and a surfer to help save the lives of six people and open doors for ministry through an intense life-and-death struggle at sea.

When a passenger ferry capsized in the Philippine Sea on its way to Siargao Island last November, Alex jumped from his nearby vessel and rescued several drowning children. His wife Carmen, a Filipino nurse, cared for victims on board. Not only did the 36-year-old surfer help save five children and one adult from death, but he shared the hope of Christ with them and their families.

The newlyweds were aboard the MV Sofia when they came upon the wooden-hulled Leonida II, capsized and floating on its end. Like tiny ants bobbing in the waves, nearly 70 adults and children were struggling to stay afloat. Dead bodies and debris tossed in the waves.

Urged by another surfer to help, Alex looked over the railing and waited for an opportunity. "Then I saw a woman all by herself. You could see in her face: She had already given up," he recalled. "I threw my board over and jumped in an endless fall." Paddling against large swells and the notoriously dangerous currents of the Straits of Surigao, he couldn't find her.

"Then it was like I was just directed by the Holy Spirit; I saw all these little heads floating in the water. These children were hanging on to a five-gallon jug, and they were drowning," he said. Shoving his board under the arms of three of them, he reached below the surface and grabbed another who had gone under. "You're not going to die today," he said.

He instructed them in Filipino to remain calm and kick away from others who might endanger them. Two of the teenage girls were hysterical, afraid the boat would leave



Alex Montenegro, right, helped rescue several people.

them behind. "I knew I had to calm them down to conserve their strength," he said. Then they noticed a beautiful rainbow. "Do you know the story of the rainbow?" Alex asked. "It's a symbol of God's enduring love for mankind, a promise of life." He recalled, "I wanted them to look up, get their air pipes clear." The children calmed. "I believe God sent that rainbow," Alex said later. "It was like the soft, still voice of the Lord in the background."

With Alex's other board, two Australians rescued the first young woman and an older woman. "The three of us and the six survivors formed a huddle with the two surfboards." The Sofia seemed nearly half a mile away. The two Australians and three survivors got aboard, and the boat made a loop back for Alex and the last three girls.

As the hulking form approached, Alex and the girls were sucked underneath the boat. "My first thought was that I had failed," he recalled. "The fleeting thought came to let go of the board and at least try to save myself. But I couldn't leave those girls." Mustering all his strength, Alex kicked in the direction from which they had come, and the four popped above the surface. Again swept away from the Sofia, Alex tried to quell the panic rising in his

chest. "Then suddenly, miraculously, a Filipino man in a life vest swam up to us. That man was my angel."

The bright orange life vest was a beacon in the dark water, and the ship's captain headed toward them. The two smallest girls were lifted aboard. "Then I felt the propeller near my legs," Alex recalled. A surge tossed them both, and Alex held fast to the last girl and his board. Then the captain threw the ship in reverse, and the force pushed them back toward the ropes and the crewmembers hanging from the side. They grabbed his board; he grabbed the ropes and was hoisted up—the last living person pulled from the water that day. Sixty-six people survived, with 19 confirmed dead and at least a dozen missing.

A few days later, Alex and Carmen met some of the families. The father of the 9-year-old girl sobbed against Alex's shoulder for several minutes. As the family started to thank him, Alex said, "Give thanks to the Lord." They were surprised. "Most foreigners come there to party," he explained. "They were shocked that I spoke about the Lord."

Amazingly, the event happened in an area where he has always desired to plant a church. "In missions, you can't just go into an area and minister," he explained. "People aren't going to trust you. ... But it has given me legitimacy on the island and in the region."

He added, "I see His hand in this so clearly; it was so amazing that it was children I rescued." His ministry had included children and young people with the CC-affiliated Pastoral Training of Asia. After his sabbatical in the U.S., he hopes to return to the Philippines with Carmen and plant a church. He added, "The need is so great for people to go share the Gospel, especially in third-world countries; people are dying to hear it." 🙏