

On June 7, 1994, I was returning home by ferry with five other missionaries after a zone conference in Eastern Samar, Philippines. The night air was humid and heavy. After stowing our travel bags at our cots on the second level, four of us went to the front deck to escape the heat. Elders Dunford and Bermudez, however, stayed and went to sleep.

I was conversing with Elder Kern when we heard a firecracker-like explosion from the starboard side. Suddenly flames, fed by fuel from the engine room, were consuming the back of the ship. Smoke filled the passageways, followed by a power outage that left the panicked passengers in the dark.

The four of us on deck gathered together, praying for calm and clear thinking and for the Spirit to guide us. Immediately afterward, Elder Valentine walked quickly back inside the ship looking for life jackets. In the cabin he met Elder Dunford, who gave him two life jackets and left to find Elder Bermudez. Then Elder Valentine found two more life jackets in the dark. Miraculously, despite the chaos, he made it down the passageway without anyone getting in his way, and he was back on deck in 20 seconds. By this time the bow was crowded with passengers, and the flames were coming close. There was no other choice except to jump. We put on our life jackets and said a

short prayer before plunging in. Elder Valentine was shoved by the panicked group behind us, but he hit the water unharmed 10 feet (3 m) below.

The area around the boat was well lit because of the fire, and we could hear the screams of people around us. The four of us regrouped a short distance from the boat, amid the crowds that had also jumped, and swam to get away from the burning three-level vessel. We prayed again, thanking our Father in Heaven for the protection we had received and asked for help in finding our companions, Elder Dunford and Elder Bermudez. Elder Valentine saw them with life jackets, but we hadn't seen them on the deck.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL T. MALM

THE LORD TRULY PROTECTED US

By Kevin D. Casper



As the fire went out, the night became completely dark, and the waves were rolling, making it difficult for us to stay afloat even with the life jackets. Again we offered a prayer, this time asking for guidance to someone we could help. We soon found two women with children and an elderly man, and we took turns keeping everyone afloat. We managed until we found a small raft and put the passengers on it, but we felt others could use it, so we remained behind in the water.

After 30 minutes the wind picked up, rain started falling, and the already-large waves grew. We were still not sure what had happened to the other elders and knew the storm would halt any rescue efforts. Elder Kern, acting

as a voice for the group, prayed for the storm to calm and that the other elders would be protected. Within a few minutes, the storm was gone.

We waited, awed by what we had witnessed, then heard Elder Dunford yelling out to Elder Kern. We shouted and swam towards them. Elders Dunford and Bermudez had managed to jump off the ship by climbing out a window, and they had two women, without life jackets, clinging to their backs.

We stayed together for some time, then caught sight of fishing boat lights leaving the Guiuan shore area. It was not long until one boat discovered us, but it was almost full, so we placed the two women in it and waited.

We had been in the water for two hours when another boat found us and took us to shore. We made it to the missionary apartment in Guiuan in the early morning of June 8, which was my 21st birthday. We prayed for the safe rescue of others still out in the sea and again gave thanks to our Heavenly Father for the protection we had received.

I will never forget this experience, and I hope never to forget the feeling of security we had throughout the whole ordeal. The Lord truly protected us. From this experience, I gained a greater testimony that the Lord is with His children always and grants us the peace and help we need during our trials. ■

