

EXCERPT

Despite the signal beacons and lifeguards, Newport was fortunate to have swimming/surfing star Duke Kahanamoku, camped on the Corona del Mar beach the morning of June 14, 1925. Duke was with some of his buddies (the Henry brothers, Bill and Tom; the Vultee brothers, Jerry and Art; Owen Hale; and Henry Chapple), and together they performed what others would later call a miracle.

The Hawaiian swimmer was just going out for his morning swim when he noticed the heavy ground swells which turned into tall-crested waves as they rounded the breakwater. Out in the breakwater, the forty-foot fishing yacht *Thelma* was in trouble. It had been chartered by a party from Riverside which had left Newport the previous morning bound for a day's fishing out at sea.

The *Thelma*, a five-ton craft partly owned by Jeff Cravath, Philadelphia baseball star, was nearing the end of the breakwater into open sea when the first ground swell loomed dead ahead. The swell, as it gained momentum, merged into a mountainous wave and crashed over the bow, smashing through the heavy plate glass of the engine-room flooding the compartment and stopping the engine. Practically all the Riverside fishermen were swept overboard with the first wave and were struggling in the midst of the torn wreckage and pounding waves. Another wave quickly followed in the wake of the first, which swept the boat its entire length, sending rigging overboard into a maelstrom of confusion. It then pitched the boat on its side.

Encumbered by heavy clothing, the Riverside men were thrown from the boat which started to sink almost immediately. They hadn't had time to put on life preservers before the small boat was caught broadside in the teeth of three tremendous breakers and rolled completely over three times from starboard to port on the sands of the shallow Newport sandbar. Only a few were able to reach the upturned craft and cling safely to the keel.

On the near-by beach were Duke Kahanamoku, Antar Deraga, captain of the Newport lifeguards; Charles Plummer, lifeguard; Thomas Sheffield, captain of the Corona del Mar Swimming Club; Gerard Vultee, William Herwig and Owen Hale, who immediately went to the rescue.

Battling with his surfboard through the heavy seas, Kahanamoku was the first to reach the drowning men. He made three successive trips to the beach and carried four victims the first trip, three the second and one the third. Sheffield, Plummer and Deraga were credited with saving four; while other members of the rescue party waded into the surf and carried the drowning men to safety as Kahanamoku brought them shoreward. Fred Hock, A. Huber, Frank Morris, Myron Bland, Fern Hock, Ellsworth Mott, William McDermott, Earl Griggs, Jack Berry, Philip Larsen, Albert Johnson and Edward Sneed were rescued, several of them near death when they were brought to shore. The drowned were William W. Squires, Riverside; Ralph Fransworth, Riverside; John and Edgar Morris, Arlington, and E.E. McClain, father-in-law of John Morris.

Captain Porter of Newport Beach expressed the belief that at least eight or ten more would have drowned had not Kahanamoku and Deraga been ready with immediate assistance. "The Duke's performance was the most superhuman rescue act and the finest display of surfboard riding that has ever been seen in the world, I believe," he said.

When asked how he managed to rescue so many, Kahanamoku replied: "I do not know. It was done. That is the main thing. By a few tricks, perhaps."

A few days later (June 18, 1925) the Edgewater Club of Southern California announced they were inspired by Kahanamoku's performance and "surfboard riding," which made possible Kahanamoku's sensational rescue. Henceforth, surfboard riding would be taught on an extensive scale to members of the club. Surf riding had gained honor and respectability.

Years later Duke Kahanamoku remembered the experience:

Big green walls of water were sliding in from the horizon, building up to bar like heights, then curling and crashing on the shore. Only a porpoise, a shark or a sea lion had any right to be out there. From shore we suddenly saw the charter fishing boat, the Thelma, wallowing in the water just seaward of where the breakers were falling. The craft appeared to be trying to fight her way toward safe water, but it was obviously a losing battle. You could see her rails crowded with fishermen who, at the moment, certainly had other things in mind than fishing. Mine was the only board handy right then—and I was hoping I wouldn't have to use it...

It was obvious that the Thelma had capsized and thrown her passengers into the boiling sea. Neither I nor my pals were thinking heroics; we were simply running—me with a board, and the others to get their boards— and hoping we could save lives..."

The Hawaiian Society of Los Angeles would present the Duke with a medal for heroism on September 4, 1925, before a large and enthusiastic assembly at the Alexander Hotel. On Christmas Day 1925, the Los Angeles Athletic Club would honor its hero with a gold watch. Thirty-two years later, three of the grateful men whose lives had been saved, thanked the Duke in person before a national television audience on NBC's "This IS Your Life." The embarrassed Duke simply replied, "That's okay."