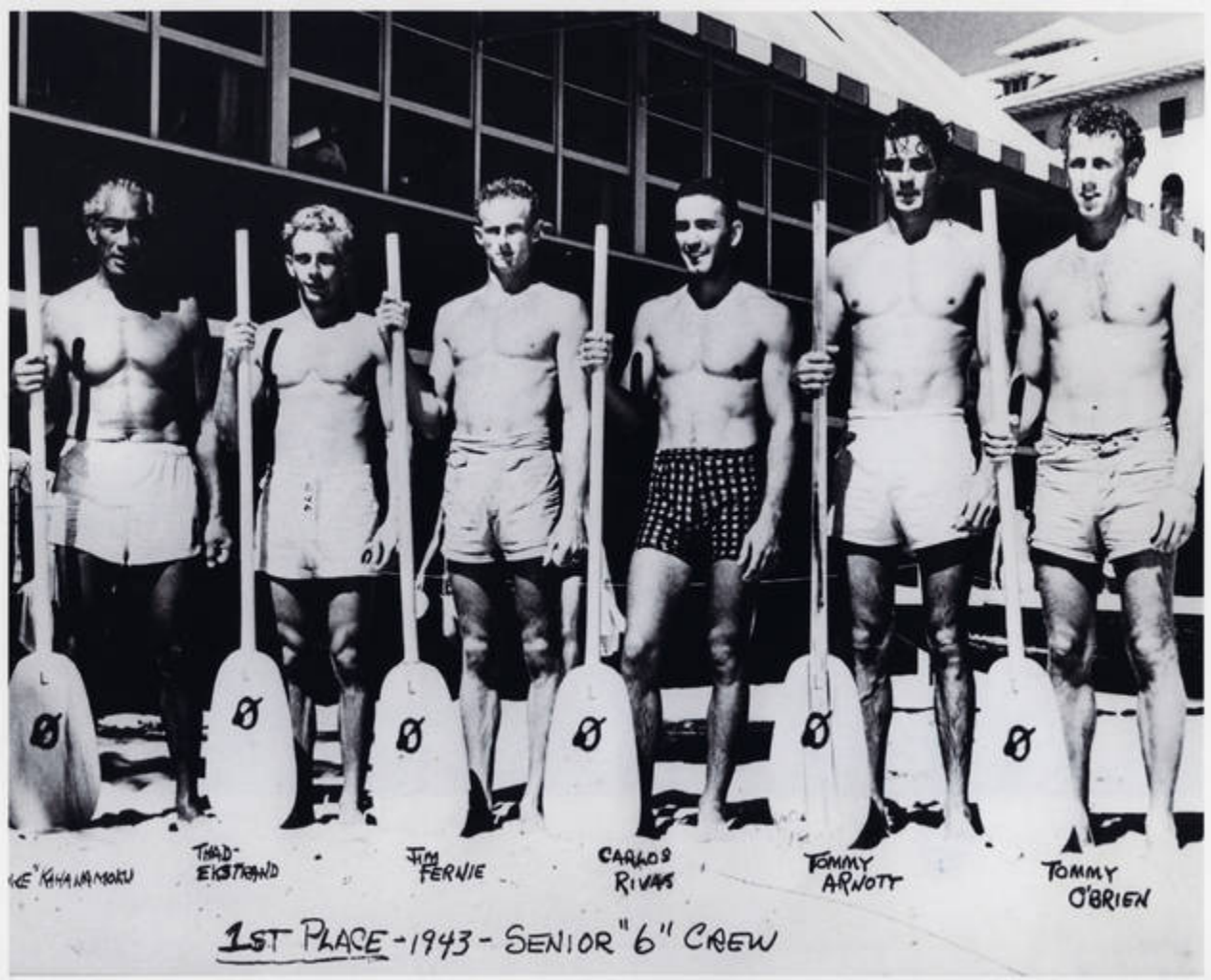


Sports

# Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta is a Waikiki tradition

By [Cindy Luis](#), Honolulu Star Advertiser Sports  
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**STAR-ADVERTISER PHOTO**

In 1943, Duke Kahanamoku, left, Thad Ekstrand, Jim Fernie, Carlos Rivas, Tommy Arnott and Tommy O'Brien paddled Leilani to first place in the senior crew.



**STAR-ADVERTISER PHOTO**

**Duke Kahanamoku steered Leilani during the 1943 race.**

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Once a year, the mystique and allure of old Waikiki mix with the luck of the ocean, returning like the tide off the beaches between the Moana and the Royal Hawaiian hotels.

It is here, every Fourth of July since 1943, that tradition rides the waves of the often unpredictable surf. The competition is as fierce as it is fun, particularly in the prestigious senior men's and women's races, where to the victors go the spoils: the eventual engraving of the winning crew names on the perpetual trophies that were filled with champagne enjoyed on the podium and often shared with the second-place teams.

The Walter J. Macfarlane Regatta celebrates its 75th running Tuesday, the diamond jubilee of the world's longest running outrigger canoe race that was first held when barbed wire still lined the sands of Waikiki as part of the World War II fortifications. Although Outrigger Canoe Club had hosted canoe races on the 4th since its founding in 1908, it wasn't until 1943 that what was then

known as the “Water Carnival” became a permanent fixture on the racing schedule with the “Walter Macfarlane Memorial Races” in honor of the club’s late president “Walter Mac.”

It continues as the Oahu Hawaiian Canoe Racing Association’s lone surf race, where veteran steersmen are allowed to steer as many races as they wish due to the tricky conditions and where expert wave-catching can carry any underdog to a gold medal.

“I think it’s just the kind of day that puts a smile on everyone’s face,” said OCC veteran waterman Walter Guild, named for his grand uncle Macfarlane. “The pressure that you face during the normal regatta season is off, you’re not looking to earn points to qualify for ‘states.’ (state championship regatta). If you don’t win, it doesn’t matter.

“You have the holiday, where the whole country is enjoying it, and then add the tradition. It’s old Waikiki brought into the modern era, where it’s tied back to the old days when the club was right there and Duke Kahanamoku was steering.

“That’s what makes it special.”

As longtime OCC paddler and steersman Marc Haine once said, “Qualifying for this race is the gift. Being in the race is the prestige. The surf is the motivation, the draw. It brings out the Hawaiian-ness of the sport.”

Crews qualify for the Macfarlane based on points earned during the four June regattas. Adding to the exclusivity is the reduction of competition lanes from 14 to seven due to the limited racing area.

The condensed field heightens the excitement and has many a savvy steersman using every trick from seat 6 to take advantage of the subtleties of the bending waves.

“There are tricks to the trade, ways for crews that aren’t necessarily the best to win,” said retired OCC steersman Fred Hemmings, who held the record for most documented steering wins (58) through 2010. “Sometimes you just have to be in the right place at the right time.

“Taking advantage of those little subtleties can mean the difference between gold and also-ran.”

The one tradition that has changed is the use of koa canoes. Until 1979, all clubs were required to race their precious koas. It was that year, when Waikiki Surf Club's venerable Malia was damaged and lost part of her bow after a collision that OHCRA made it optional.

"In 1981, Surf Club again used Malia and it was damaged again," OCC historian Marilyn Kali said, "and that was the last time koas were optional. It's been fiberglass since then."

"As much as we hated to end that tradition, our koa canoes are to be cherished," Hemmings said. "It is such a fun race."

"If you want one word to describe it, it's 'waves.'"

There's another word that describes the regatta's legacy: Kahanamoku. Hawaii's first and arguable greatest Olympian and athlete steered the Leilani to three wins in 1943, including the blue-ribbon race, the senior men.

That first Macfarlane had eight men's races, two for women, a relay race, one for surfboards and a tug-of-war. It has since grown to 46 races ... all for outrigger canoes. A special race was added in 2010 for military members from Oahu's five service branches who open the regatta at 8:30 a.m. with a half-mile event and vie for the USS Arizona Memorial Trophy.