



By Ron Haworth

MEN AGAINST THE SEA

The Fateful Moloka`i Race of 1966



The ocean was rough with 15-foot swells for the 1966 Moloka`i Race.

View from *Leilani* Six Seat: "Oh! Oh! It's getting bigger out here!"

Mike Holmes had that revelation flash through his mind as Sherry Dowsett's 56-foot escort boat, *Hula Kai*, was returning from a paddler drop when 50 yards away she punched through a big swell and the entire bottom of the boat was in the air at 45 degrees except for the last 10 feet, prop, and rudder.

"We were about a third of the way across the channel and the waves were estimated later to be 15 feet. It was about here I vividly recall Mark Buck stroking down the face of a wave and at bottom only his head and neck were above water."

It was men against the sea during the 1966 Moloka`i to Oahu Canoe Race under slate gray skies in a snarly Kaiwi Channel...(translated) 'channel of bones'... and still the roughest in race history. Twelve canoes started...six finished.

Kailua Hawaiian Civic Club's beautiful koa *Uwila* had set the record in 1964 but this day would tragically break apart under tow and have pieces days later wash ashore at Sandy Beach. The channel was so rough Lanikai finished the race with five seats empty because four crewmen were too seasick to continue.

AWOL...One Cameraman

An omen of what lay ahead was unwittingly provided by a National Geographic photographer at race start. Hanging fiercely onto *Hula Kai*'s flybridge he in panic asked Dowsett if he saw the 10-12 foot set about to close out the Hale O Lono channel. Dowsett's casual affirmative nod accompanied by a push of the throttle punched *Hula Kai* forward to crest the set and the photographer to the rail to launch a 'rainbow arch' before going below with camera never to photograph the awesome race conditions.

So it was left to Jerry Ober, 'the ever on the scene' *Forecast* editor, to document an unfolding adventure today Fred Hemmings remembers as EPIC. Ober wrote, "Soon after the start the race settled into a three canoe affair with Waikiki Surf Club, Lanikai, and Outrigger in that order as they paralleled the Molokai coast and raced past La`au Point and into the channel.

"Outrigger soon left Lanikai behind with a stroke count exceeding 50 per minute and set a northwesterly course. The wind was gusting 30 knots from the northeast with constant 15 foot swells punctuated by 20 footers coming through with increasing regularity; later some compared them to the

Makaha point break."

Leilani then caught Surf Club to take a 200 to 300 yard lead before fate was to intervene.

Zipper Zapped

Mike Holmes, steering, recalls in vivid detail the events which led up to the swamping and what could have led to the total destruction of Outrigger's beloved koa canoe *Leilani*. "A paddler lost concentration on his first change and just jumped without unzipping the cover as his relief reached for the canoe.

"Buck subsequently spent 15 minutes trying to sew it up, and with his head down, got very seasick. But he was hampered because seat number two still had to get in and out and the tops of the swells were breaking whitecaps. Mark always had a 'rigging bag' containing everything needed to fix what he and Cline Mann could envision going wrong; hence the sail needle."

But the zipper saga had a sequel. Before the next change Hemmings yelled a reminder, "Unzip before you get out!" This might have been counterproductive because he overcompensated for his earlier error and ran the zipper past the end stop track and now the cover was beyond repair!

Observers agree it was three large waves breaking in rapid succession which doomed *Leilani*. She was unable to shake free of the tons of water and floundered.

"Until then we had Tom Bean bailing most of the race along with his counterpart in five seat and still managed to snare the lead from Surf Club. How quickly things changed; suddenly I was positive *Leilani* was headed for the 'boneyard', she recovered but swamped; we were pau, but were yet to know it," Mike conceded.

The broken zipper! The irrevocable consequences of exuberance and brief loss of concentration had foiled any chance of victory for the near novice crew.

Suddenly, the ageless conflict pitting 'men against the sea' was magnified. For Outrigger the race would not be completed but sheer physical exhaustion and mind fatigue was to begin for crew and helpers on *Hula Kai* and Tom Arnott's smaller auxiliary ski boat boasting twin Chrysler Outboards.

The crew had tried in vain to empty *Leilani* but high seas thwarted their efforts. After what some remember as two hours of Herculean effort Coach Al Lemes was finally convinced to quit the race ... save the canoe and avoid possible serious injury to paddlers...and tow the *Leilani* to Oahu.

So the crew and escort helpers set about their task while

fighting the stormy sea to salvage the wounded canoe in a channel which that day gave no quarter. Mike remembers undoing the final cover ties at the front iako in order to attach a tow line.

"While we got organized I went aboard *Hula Kai* to get warm. But once under tow the *Leilani* filled with water and acted like a heavy fishing lure, which became Sherry's nightmare keeping *Hula Kai* away from the out of control canoe, and I knew it was going to be a long day!"

It was at this point Mike, standing next to a *Hula Kai* deckhand, remembers the three-quarter inch towline to *Leilani* stretched by 30 percent in length, broke and snapped back hitting the deckhand in the crotch and dropped him screaming in agony doing what Mike calls the 'cockroach crawl'. "I realized I was in the wrong place and dove back into the ocean and swam to the relative safety of the auxiliary boat."

Sheer Will and Might and Mortal Men

What happened next likely saved the *Leilani* from the fate suffered by *Uwila*.

Hemmings closed his eyes, and rewound his memory spool. "When towing proved fruitless it was decided to somehow get *Leilani* onboard *Hula Kai*. But by now some of our crew was pretty much exhausted and we probably had no more than five in the water to wrestle *Leilani*."

With a buoy knife we sliced the rigging to free up the hull. Sherry then, with masterful seamanship, pulled *Hula Kai* around and in front of the canoe. The *Leilani* was upside down and we then put her okole on the water level swim platform at the same time we pushed down on her other end to help lift her out of the water.

At one point we hit a trough and *Leilani* shot up and hit the roof of *Hula Kai*. With the help of those on deck, pulling and lifting, we slid her over the transom. It was fortunate *Leilani* didn't break in two, although her rails were torn off and she suffered other damage.

And in the back of our minds was *Hula Kai's* spinning propeller! When it came to the final moments I think we yelled at Sherry to put the engine into neutral!"

Finally, *Leilani* was aboard, no mean feat in fifteen foot plus conditions while treading water and fighting 400 pounds of unresponsive deadweight.

Anything but *Malia*

Meanwhile...Nick Beck stroking Waikiki Surf's *Malia* once told this writer for *Surfer Magazine*: "Wave after wave threatened to end it all. Huge gray monsters rolled upon us from the east, often their crests exploding spookily overhead as we rose on cockeyed angles under their advance. Then we'd be hurtling down the face like an out-of-control takeoff."

"I found myself subconsciously sucking a quick breath before *Malia* buried her manu and I was under water...The first giant comber to huli us is one I'll never forget. Its forward wall was so sheer it dipped our ama as the canoe climbed its critical face and hung fleetingly like a fly...then it broke and over we went."

Wally Froiseth yelled, "Don't panic! It can never happen again"...but it did...twice. But *Malia* survived without swamping and went on to a gallant win in 6:37:13.

Hemmings believes the race would be cancelled by the Coast Guard if held in contemporary times and Mike, whose

email begins with 'oceanman', agrees it would be prudent, "Most of us learned there are times when it is not smart to challenge the ocean. It was a very humbling, dangerous, sad morning."

"It was a day of learning how powerful the ocean can be and that it can take an undeniable toll on equipment and people's mental awareness. Luckily, none of the paddlers or helpers was seriously injured."

And yet, because six of our crew was novice to the channel and we were doing so well, even with the zipper mishap, for me, it is a memory of pride as well as sadness."

Buck is grateful Outrigger had an escort the size of *Hula Kai* to salvage and bring *Leilani* home.

Koa Log Shaving

Outrigger's crew consisted of Tom Bean, Mark Buck, Jody D'Enbeau, Bill Eggers, Fred Hemmings, Glenn Perry, and the unrelated Mike, Robert, and Tommy Holmes. Only Buck, Mike and Robert Holmes were veteran *Moloka'i* paddlers.

Within the span of four years both *Kakina* and *Leilani*, the very koa figureheads of our Club, were severely damaged. Today, Tay Perry estimates only 13-20 percent remains of the original koa logs, but they still race with monarch dignity. And treated with respect, loving care, and paddled with pride by our younger paddlers, will continue to do so under Outrigger crimson and white.



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