



By Ron Haworth

### **"Talk to me, Ron, it's comforting."**

Harry Huffaker exhaled those words between strokes when halfway across the Alenuihaha Channel in an unsuccessful attempt to become the first to swim the 29.5 miles from the Big Island to Maui.

The word "Alenuihaha" had purred deceptively for weeks off sponsoring Outrigger Canoe Club escort tongues and offered no hint of what lay ahead for Huffaker's two attempts to conquer the roughest channel in the Hawaiian chain.

This, the first, in April 1969 ended after 17 1/2 hours when two or three miles from Maui he was pulled from the ocean, wrapped in blankets, and attended by Dr. Bob Smith who diagnosed him with hypothermia.

Harry being aided over the transom remains my most poignant and vivid memory of all his channel victories and defeats. I thought back a few hours earlier when he'd asked for something to eat. It was all he could do to grip the scraps of tuna. It was not uncommon to spoon feed him canned peaches because the syrup soothed the throat. His face was gray-white; he treaded water, looked up at the overcast sky, and wished, "If only the sun would come out; I'm so cold."

Later that year in August he would be the first to swim, in 20 hours the Alenuihaha, and join a select cadre of humans who have dug deep into themselves to achieve what most would consider unattainable.

### **Harry's Mindset**

Nobody can fully appreciate long distance swimming until he has witnessed it while escorting on a paddleboard and been kin and companion to pain, weariness, and tedious boredom, and, at times, faltering hope as the island goal beckoned and taunted from a distance.

What possesses the untamed human spirit to strive to attain goals of endurance beyond the dreams, capabilities, and desire of most? What motivates them to swim formidable channels from night into sunrise through day into sunset and greet a second night not dispirited?

How does one condition the mind, let alone the body, to undertake odysseys wrought with pain, danger, and the unknown? Why? For what purpose?

George Mallory in 1924, before his third attempt to climb Mount Everest, was asked why he wanted to challenge the highest peak in the world. "Because it's there," he replied.

### **False Start**

Mallory displayed natural climbing ability and curiosity from a young age. Huffaker did not take to water instinctively like a salmon swims upstream.

"When I was nine years old I saw a notice that swimming try outs for a Grosse Point Yacht Club swim team were to be held", he remembered. "And knowing a couple of my friends would be attending I decided to show up."

When the day arrived Harry stood on the pool's edge and on the command, "GO", dove in, but Harry hadn't taken into account he didn't know how to swim. "But it looked easy and if my friends could do it so could I," thought the nine year old.

"After an unsuccessful, violent struggle to stay afloat I sank to the bottom. When my absence was noticed I was pulled out unconscious, (read code blue)." Upon being resuscitated the coach sent Harry home with a note telling his parents he needed swimming lessons before trying out for the team.

Harry did learn to float and later became a high school standout swimmer and held the national high school record for the 150 yard medley and later was a three year All-American collegiate sprinter at University of Michigan. So what motivated him from pool confines and sprints to marathon channel swims with mirage horizons?

"I was crossing the English Channel one day when I thought to myself, this might be fun to swim."

Already in his channel log book before Alenuihaha was Molokai to O'ahu 1967 and a 3:53 a.m. start beneath a bright moon. Thirteen and a half hours later he would set a record and body surf ashore at Sandy Beach and become the second man after Keo Nakama to swim the Ka'iwi Channel. On the debit side were two unsuccessful, (and not much fun), attempts of the English Channel where he blacked out near the finish due to 56 degree water.

"I think about anything but swimming out there, I just zone out to achieve a level of self hypnosis; endorphins, a chemical released in the brain, to reduce the sensation of pain and in large amounts can make you feel relaxed and full of energy."

"Having trained sufficiently and prepared properly I undertake a swim feeling I have a decent shot at success." Harry added, "I have an intense desire not to let my support team down knowing they were selfless on my behalf."

### **The Portuguese Navy**

Huffaker's longest channel marathon was a failed 21 hour attempt to become the first to swim "uphill" from O'ahu to Molokai. His second attempt in 1972 was successful, but only after swimming into a flotilla of Portuguese Man of War six miles from Makapu'u. I was by his side and was also stung but not as severely.

"It was the worst pain in my life," he told me. "The first ones hit me on the face, then wrapped around my throat and chest and legs. For thirty seconds there was just pain then their poison exploded in my brain. My legs became paralyzed; I had difficulty breathing and my face felt as if acid had been poured on it."

Thirty minutes later he was still crippled with arms and legs almost useless, barely able to stay afloat. With twenty miles to Molokai he should have terminated the swim and, with head high, accepted defeat. But channel swimmers and mountain climbers share that rare human gene which motivates them onward and upward through adversity most will never encounter, and quickly succumb to if they did.

Makapu'u...stroke one taken at 2:30 a.m. under a moonless canopy... to a sandy beach near Puu O Kaiaka close to Ilio Point; 16 hours and 15 minutes, and 50,000 plus strokes logged, the body- crippling-pain forgotten, a triumphant Huffaker.

faker tossed Molokai sand into the air.

He had become the sole charter member of the "O'ahu to Molokai Swim Both Ways Club". Forest Nelson joined the club 34 years later in a time of 16:36. Escorts that historic day also included paddlers Bruce Ames, Bob Lundy, Rick Steere, and escort boat skipper Simon Cardew.

Harry Huffaker was inducted into the International Marathon Swimming Hall of Fame in 2011. Previously, he was a first-year inductee in the Hawaii Swimming Hall of Fame when created in 2002.

To think it all began with youthful exuberance and a near drowning.

## In Memoriam

### Michael E. Leeper

Deceased: December 18, 2015  
Club Member: 40 Years

### Billie Baird

Deceased: April 21, 2016  
Club Member: 41 Years

### May E. Borthwick

Deceased: April 15, 2016  
Club Member: 73 Years

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## OCC Channel Swimmers

Harry Huffaker was the first OCC member to cross one of the nine Hawaii channels in 1967 but he wasn't the last. Others include:

### Alalakeiki Channel

*Kahoolawe to Maui 7 miles*  
1992 Uli Klinke  
2001 Laurie Foster (reverse)

### Alenuihaha Channel

*Hawaii to Maui 30 miles*  
1970 Harry Huffaker  
2011 Mike Spalding

### Auau Channel

*Lanai to Maui 8.8 miles*  
1970 Jim Caldwell  
1983 Jim Krueger  
1983 Mike Spalding  
1984 Ian Emberson  
1984 Mike Miller  
1987 Harry Huffaker  
1987 Uli Klinke  
1987 Jim Kruger  
1987 Bruce Sloan

1987 Diane Stowell  
1989 Harry Huffaker (twice)  
1990 Mike Miller  
2002 Mike Miller  
2003 John Nielsen  
2004 Mackenzie Miller  
2004 Mike Miller  
2008 Mackenzie Miller  
2011 Mike Miller (reverse)  
2014 Stefan Reinke  
2015 Laurie Foster  
2015 Mary Quinn

### Kalohi Channel

*Lanai to Molokai 9.3 miles*  
1989 Harry Huffaker (reverse)  
1989 Uli Klinke  
2007 Laurie Foster (reverse)  
2007 Mike Spalding (reverse)  
2014 Stefan Reinke

### Kaulakahi Channel

*Kauai to Niihau 17 miles*  
2003 Laurie Foster  
2003 Mike Spalding

### Kaiwi Channel

*Molokai to Oahu 26 miles*  
1967 Harry Huffaker  
1972 Harry Huffaker (reverse)  
1979 Ian Emberson  
1979 Mike Miller  
2007 Mike Spalding  
2009 Mackenzie Miller

### Kealaikahiku Channel

*Kahoolawe to Lanai 17 miles*  
2005 Laurie Foster  
2005 Mike Spalding

### Palilolo Channel

*Maui to Molokai 8.5 miles*  
1973 Jim Caldwell  
1989 Harry Huffaker  
1990 Mike Spalding  
1991 Uli Klinke  
1993 Dennis Blake