

EDDIE WOULD GO

WITH HIS FELLOW CREW MEMBERS CLINGING LIKE 'OPIHI TO THE CAPSIZED HÖKŪLE'A, EDDIE AIKAU SET OFF ON A SURFBOARD TO GO FOR HELP—AND WAS NEVER SEEN AGAIN.

BY MARION LYMAN-MERSEREAU

The first time I saw him he was dwarfed by a towering wave. His legs set in a wide stance on his long surfboard, he slid across the face of a 30-foot monster generated by a storm somewhere in the North Pacific. I was watching the 1976 Smirnoff Pro-Am surf meet at Waimea Bay and had heard that the man on the 30-footer, Eddie Aikau, was one of the best big-wave surfers around. I assumed he was a big man. When I met him several years later, I was surprised to see that he was of average height. He had the broad shoulders, narrow hips and slender legs of a man who spends more time in water than on land.

Now, walking through a shopping mall with my sons, I saw a picture of him on a large black and white poster, a stark contrast to the brightly colored surfboards, name-brand fashion and paraphernalia in the surf shop. The lack of color in the poster and the solemn expression on his face hinted of tragedy. I recalled the last few days I had spent with him on the *Hökūle'a* before he set off in search of rescue.

In the late afternoon of March 16, 1978, we sat in a large circle at Ala Moana

Marion Lyman-Mersereau was a crew member of the ill-fated 1978 Hōkūle'a voyage that took Eddie Aikau's life.



COURTESY THE AIKAU FAMILY COLLECTION

park sharing the bitter-tasting, mouth-numbing 'awa drink. We each took a sip from the coconut shell cup as it was formally served to us in the custom of our ancestors, the ancient Polynesians. Gov. George Ariyoshi and Mayor Frank Fasi presented each crew member with a maile lei. Hundreds of people had gathered to watch the departure of the second voyage of the *Hökūle'a*.

Hökūle'a was conceived in 1974 by three men, Ben Finney, Herb Kane and Tommy Holmes, who founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society. Their objective was to sail a performance replica of an ancient Polynesian double-hulled voy-

aging canoe to Tahiti and back using non-instrumental navigation techniques. By accomplishing this feat they would put to rest the accidental drift theory of Polynesian migration. This theory suggested that the Polynesians had found the remote islands of Hawai'i by chance rather than through skilled and purposeful voyaging methods. It negated their ability to build large seaworthy sailing canoes that could store enough food and water for crews to voyage thousands of miles. It also negated the incredible navigation ability which the Polynesians, for many generations, had developed to a fine art through their sensitivity to and awareness of their environment.

Hökūle'a achieved its goal in 1976. After 31 days at sea, relying on the skills of master navigator Mau Piailug and Tahitian navigator Roto Williams, the *Hökūle'a* reached Tahiti. Mau, of Satawal Island in Yap, Micronesia, had been trained in the ancient method of non-instrumental navigation. This art of way-finding had virtually been lost in today's technological world, except to a handful of masters who had been carefully selected and trained from the time they were children. Two years after the Tahiti voyage, *Hökūle'a* was set to repeat the feat with navigator Nainoa Thompson, a young man of Hawaiian descent who had been intensively study- **CONTINUED ON 113**

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ing non-instrumental navigation with Mau.

Selection of the 1978 crew was very methodical. Twenty-five of us, dreaming of adventure, hoped to be among the privileged ones to follow in the footsteps of the 1976 crew members. We were selected by three criteria: our physical health, our psychological health, and our ability in sailing the canoe. We were given a complete physical by a pre-selected crew member, Dr. Charman Akina. Our psychological tests were interpreted by the project director, Dr. Ben Young, who was a psychiatrist. Our skills with the canoe were evaluated by pre-selected crew members during training sails on the *Höküle'a*.

On the night of our selection, while we were waiting for the final committee meeting to adjourn and announce the names of the crew who would become part of *Höküle'a's* proud history, Eddie sang us a song. In a soft-spoken, thoughtful manner, he stood before us and introduced the song he had composed. "I know we don't know who made crew yet, but I just wanted to sing this song that I wrote for all of you since we've spent so much time working and training together." He played the song "*Höküle'a*" on his guitar in slack key.

*Hawai'i's pride she sails with the wind
and proud are we to see her sail free
Feelings deep and so strong
For Hökü, Höküle'a
For Hökü, Höküle'a.*

*The stars that shine to guide her straight path
across the sea, down to Tahiti
then back to Hawai'i she sails
For Hökü, Höküle'a
For Hökü, Höküle'a.*

I don't think there was a dry eye in the room when he finished. I felt great admiration for this man who was not only a courageous and gifted athlete, but a sensitive and talented musician as well. I looked forward to getting to know him if we were both selected. A few minutes later the crew was announced—I would be on the voyage to Tahiti. I vaguely heard the other list of names—those who would be on the return trip. I heaved a grateful sigh of relief. My dream of voyaging on *Höküle'a* was becoming a reality.

About three weeks later, 16 men and I boarded the *Höküle'a* from the dock at Magic Island. The boat was laden with

food and water for the 30-day passage. A state-of-the-art radio system that had been donated and installed by KEMS Kewalo, a local marine electronics company, was being tested throughout the day. There would be no escort vessel as there had been in 1976. Instead, an instrumental navigator, Norman Pi'ianaia, would be on board as backup for Nainoa Thompson. Pi'ianaia was to keep his instrument data confidential unless it appeared the safety of the crew was in jeopardy.

We boarded the canoe close to sunset and vocalist Loyal Garner led the crowd in singing "Hawai'i Aloha." The canoe was set free of the lines that held her captive to land. The wind was blowing at a stiff 30 to 35 mph and the seas were 6 to 8 feet as we sailed southeast toward Moloka'i. We quickly lost the flotilla of well-wishers that escorted us out to the big seas of the Kaiwi Channel off Diamond Head. The sun had just set as the crew on my watch got ready to sleep for a few hours before we had to come on duty at midnight.

I have vivid memories of being tightly squeezed with several other bodies into the small thatched hale in the center of the boat. The spray from the swells made me thankful I had my foul weather gear on. The anticipation of the voyage and the excitement of the day helped me doze off into an uneasy sleep. Lying on the deck a few feet above the ocean, I felt intimate with every move the canoe made as she climbed and crested each swell, one hull at a time.

I could feel the lashings working, the miles of cord intricately wrapped around the 10 'iako, crossbeams, that bridged the two hulls. I tried to picture the boatbuilder who had transformed *Höküle'a* from an idea to a vessel. I felt safe trusting that his building expertise and his sailing experience had created a seaworthy vessel.

I must have slept a few hours. I guessed it was about midnight (the only person who was allowed to have a timepiece was our instrumental navigator, Norman Pi'ianaia) when I heard a commotion. Our captain, Dave Lyman, shouted, "All hands on deck!" Eight of us quickly squirmed out of the hale. As I moved to the leeward hull to be seasick, I noticed Norman frantically bailing one of the after-compartments of the starboard hull. The water was pouring in over the *mo'o*, gunwale, faster than he could bail.

We were on a port tack with the



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EDDIE WOULD GO

wind coming across our beam and the swells hitting us on the port side as well. Somehow the last two compartments of the starboard hull had filled with water, so we were now sailing with an extreme starboard list. I recall being told to put on a life jacket soon after the "All hands on deck" command. Then we were ordered to sit on top of a compartment cover on the port hull. Within minutes, a big gust and a rogue swell combined to lift the port hull up and over the starboard one. We all scrambled up the sides of the port hull to hang on to the bottom of our now capsized canoe.

"Make like 'opihi!" yelled John Cruse. We hung on to the hull and counted heads. All 16 of us were there. Norman tried the Gibson Girl radio; after a long time of grinding on it without any results, he gave up.

Someone asked if he could go for help on the surfboard. We could see the lights of Lāna'i and Moloka'i from where we were, and it didn't seem too far to paddle. Dave thought we should all stay together as long as it was dark and wait to see what morning would bring. We were between 5 to 10 miles from Moloka'i, so the planes that passed overhead would be at too high an altitude to see the flares. There was some discussion about the interisland flights flying at lower altitudes and starting their usual schedules in the morning. It was a cold, wet, endless night that we spent hanging on to the hull of *Hōkūle'a*.

Finally we could make out a faint brightening of the sky in the east. We began looking and listening carefully for interisland flights passing near us that we could signal with our flare gun. There were none. Evidently we had drifted out of the air traffic pattern and were being carried southward at fairly good speed by the heavy seas.

At one point, Snake Ah Hee paddled away on the surfboard, ostensibly to test the swell, wave and current action of the ocean as several of the crew members had done earlier that morning. Actually, he was planning to go for help without saying anything to anyone. Suddenly, we noticed a Coast Guard plane flying directly overhead. We were actually looking straight up at the belly of the aircraft. When Snake saw the plane, he thought it might be our rescue, and returned to the canoe. But the plane continued on its way. After some discussion, the crew officers decided that since we were drifting

away from land so quickly, someone should go for help by paddling the surfboard to either Lāna'i or Moloka'i, whichever was closer. They decided that the first person who had asked to go for help the night before was the most qualified for the challenge. Eddie would go.

Eddie Aikau was a lifeguard at Waimea Bay where he had saved hundreds of lives. He was a champion professional surfer, a humble man with a strong faith and incredible courage.

I remember an earlier incident in which Eddie had proven his grit. We were

THEY DECIDED THE FIRST PERSON WHO HAD ASKED TO GO FOR HELP THE NIGHT BEFORE WAS THE MOST QUALIFIED FOR THE CHALLENGE. EDDIE WOULD GO.

sailing into Honolulu Harbor one day after a training sail. Normally, the prevailing winds, which are trades, blew us away from the dock as we entered the harbor. This day, the wind was southerly and was pushing us directly toward the dock. If we didn't slow our approach, we would go crashing into the pier.

It would have been difficult to drop the sails because we had to unstep the masts to do so. We decided the best recourse was to close or "trice" the crab-claw sails. That way, there would still be a pocket of sail open for the wind, so the canoe would keep sailing, but not very fast.

We also realized that someone was going to have to receive the bowline on the dock and cleat it quickly to stop the *Hōkūle'a* from sailing into Nimitz Highway. Eddie volunteered to jump in the water and race the canoe to the dock to catch the bowline. It was a tense situation because the procedure required perfect timing.

We proceeded to trice the sails. The canoe slowed slightly. As we neared the pier, Eddie dived in and swam all-out for shore. He scrambled up the huge, slick, black boulders with the agility of the *'ala-*

mihī, black crab, that live on the rocks. At the precise moment we threw the bowline, he was on the dock ready to cleat and stop the canoe. It was a feat of extraordinary strength, balance and agility, and a marvel to watch. Above and beyond this, Eddie had demonstrated his willingness to serve when needed, without hesitation.

As he was doing now. We all watched as Eddie tied the surfboard leash to his ankle, and put a small, portable strobe light around his neck along with a bag containing a couple of oranges. He was hesitant about putting on the life jacket, but several of the guys encouraged him to do it, so he finally agreed. But he didn't wear it properly—instead he tied the straps around his waist, which enabled him to paddle on his knees unencumbered by the bulky jacket.

As he prepared to leave, someone asked him how long he thought it would take him to get to land. After gazing at the two islands in the distance, he guessed it would take him about five hours. He got up on his knees on the board and paddled away. We all held hands and said a prayer for Eddie.

Most of the crew spent the rest of the day diving beneath the hulls and retrieving buckets of food and jugs of water. I was still miserably seasick and was being shaded from the sun by canvas that had been cut away from the spray shields of the hulls. The canvas also served as padding for the V-shaped hull bottom, which was extremely uncomfortable to lie or sit on.

At about 3 o'clock that afternoon, we spotted a Navy ship coming toward us. We flashed rescue mirrors and shot day flares at it. The ship turned broadside to us about a quarter- to a half-mile from us, then turned and sailed away. It was beginning to look as though we were in for another long, cold night aboard our capsized canoe.

As the sun began to set and the lights of Honolulu winked on, we appeared to be drifting toward O'ahu. We were, in fact, heading toward the open ocean at a good clip, with the aid of the stiff trades and seas. Apparently we had drifted near the air traffic pattern—we were now seeing a lot of Honolulu arrivals and departures. We shot the flare gun regularly as these flights came within our range, then continued on toward their interisland destinations. Our excitement at seeing planes fly so near quickly died as we watched them come and go with-

out any sign that they knew we existed.

Thinking that all the interisland flights were finished for the evening, Captain Dave Lyman and mate Leon Sterling were just getting ready to put the flare gun away when we spotted an airplane approaching us from what seemed to be the Big Island. After a moment's hesitation—all our efforts up to this point had been useless—we decided to load the gun and shoot our few remaining flares. One flare went up just as the plane approached us, another as it was nearly overhead. The plane seemed to continue on its flight, as had all the others, when all of a sudden it banked and circled us once, twice, lost altitude, and circled a third time. Then it headed straight toward us. It flashed its headlights three times and headed back toward Honolulu.

We had been sighted! Forty-five minutes later a Coast Guard helicopter appeared in the distance, apparently looking for us with a huge search beam. It finally found us, descended and hovered about a hundred yards above the canoe, shining a bright searchlight on us. It was really quite eerie. We could hear the sound of the chopper but could not see it because of the bright light.

The copter lowered a basket and

Nainoa swam over to it. He brought back a small radio, which he handed to Dave. Dave spoke into the radio and asked if the chopper rescue team could “read” him. There was no answer. Realizing that it was a one-way radio, Dave told them to blink their lights once if they could read him. The lights blinked once—affirmative. Then Dave asked if they had heard from Eddie Aikau. The lights blinked twice—negative. Dave then reported to the Coast Guard that there was a man on a 10-foot white surfboard, with foul weather gear and a small strobe light, somewhere out in the ocean, who had left our canoe at about 10 o'clock that morning. The search for Eddie began. It seemed like just a few minutes later that we saw another helicopter come from Honolulu and begin scanning the ocean with a huge search beam.

In the meantime, I was the first of four crew members to swim over to the lowered basket and be hauled up to the belly of the chopper. After being covered with blankets, I fell asleep immediately, exhausted by the 22 hours I had spent in the water hanging on to the canoe.

There were photographers and reporters waiting for us when we arrived at the airport. My mother was there to pick me up. All I wanted was a hot shower,

some soup and my bed.

The next morning I was in a helicopter with another crewmate searching the ocean for some sign of Eddie. The search was frustrating. Every time we thought we saw a surfboard, we would descend to investigate more closely, only to find it was a whitecap on the heavy seas. Our copter never found any sign of Eddie, nor did anyone else.

Several weeks later, Eddie was declared officially “missing at sea.” There was a memorial service at Waimea Bay, where a large rock with a bronze plaque was dedicated to the memory of Eddie Aikau. The Bible verse inscribed on the plaque reads: “A greater love hath no man, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

I had never gotten to know Eddie very well. I had been looking forward to becoming friends with him on our voyage together. Two years after he was lost at sea, we succeeded in sailing to Tahiti without the aid of instruments. When we made landfall off the Tuamotus, I thought first of Eddie. Somehow I felt his presence.

Eddie Aikau was truly a modern Hawaiian hero, humble and courageous. His spirit is said to travel with *Hōkūle'a* wherever she goes. **PAU**