

Ernie Goes Surfing

Editor's Note: Here is another of the favorite Ernie Pyle columns of past years which is being reprinted during Ernie's vacation. He wrote this one in 1938.)

By ERNIE PYLE

HONOLULU—The mid-afternoon sun was hot on the beach at Waikiki. On the sands and under the umbrellas of the Outrigger Club there was a rich laziness.



PYLE

Men, deeply tanned, lay in the heat. Women in bright bathing suits dug toes into the sand. Somewhere behind the palms Hawaiians were singing.

Doris Duke was there. And her husband Jimmy Cromwell. And a princess or two. It was a beach scene out of Esquire—correct tan, dark glasses, bright trunks, leisurely ease, poise.

But suddenly people sat up and stared. Look What fantasy is this? What be this odd human contraption come into our exclusive midst?

Four dark Hawaiians carried a yellow outrigger canoe toward the water. Behind them strode a huge Hawaiian six feet and then some, great chest, muscled arms and legs, darkly brown. A figure as natural on Waikiki as the surf itself.

And behind this magnificent specimen minced an embarrassed, spindly ghost. A veritable Milquetoast of the beach. He couldn't see over the Hawaiian's shoulder. His skin was as white as writing paper. His knees didn't come together, and his arms were muscleless. He wore a common white undershirt where other men wore big raw chests. And around him dangled borrowed red trunks, far too big. He stepped awkwardly in the deep sand.

The rich beach crowd sniggered. Funny little man. Funny little hothouse man—no chest, no tan, no muscle, probably couldn't even swim. What a sight!

The big Hawaiian was Duke Kahanamoku, the great swimmer. And the awful contrast trailing behind him was, as you may have guessed me, in person. Me, wanting desperately to get under water and drown.

The canoe was built for four. Duke called to a beautiful girl on the beach, and she came running with a little child. They piled in, for ballast and the ride. I never did know who they were. He put me right in the nose. He sat in the stern.

We paddled out, against the surf and into the sun. Crossing the rollers, the prow of the canoe was left high, and would fall to the water with a smack. It was good to get way out, away from the beach crowd. We must have been half a mile out when finally Duke turned the canoe around.

"Now we'll wait for one," he said. "And when I say paddle, you paddle hard."

We sat there for many minutes in the sun, talking idly. A few canoeists and surfboard riders lay waiting also, but not very close.

Suddenly Duke dug in excitedly and yelled "Paddle!" we did, and the canoe started to move. "Paddle! Paddle hard!" Duke yelled. We clawed at the water. "Paddle hard!" Duke yelled. We labored, the girl and I. There was a roar of rushing water behind us. "Paddle harder!" yelled Duke.

Then suddenly I could feel the stern lifted. The prow dug into the water with a showering splash and the little boat trembled all over. And then we were off, as though someone had pulled a trigger and shot us out of a gun. Going like the wind, riding shoreward on a roaring downhill of white water. No need for oars now.

"Lean over toward the outrigger," yelled Duke. We were already leaning. It was a thrill. The air whistled past. The white comb of surf under our stern raced to overwhelm us, but bore us ahead of itself, just out of reach.

Duke sat hugely in the stern, his paddle dug edgewise into the water alongside, making a sort of rudder. The ride lasted maybe a minute, maybe less. Gradually we slowed. Duke humped forward. Finally the wave died and passed beneath us and the canoe floated quietly again, a hundred yards from shore. We paddled seaward again.

Half a dozen times we made the round trip. Sometimes we'd have to wait five or ten minutes for the surf to break. Once all four of us got out of the canoe and played around in water over our heads. We hung onto the outrigger, for only Duke could swim.

Each time I'd try to judge just when Duke, watching seaward, would yell "Paddle" But I never could tell. Always, when we started stroking, the water behind us seemed smooth and motionless.

But we'd paddle frantically for five or ten seconds and then I'd see the wave break on the reef, yards back of us, and start piling up its white crest, and in a few seconds it would be half under us, shooting us along before it.

I'm not sure whether the afternoon of riding the nose of an outrigger on the roaring surf was worth that awful outward march through the lounging society of Waikiki or not.

I guess maybe it was worth it. For when it was over, and we strode wetly back across the sands, I had somehow grown an inch or two, and possibly gained a few pounds, and I couldn't hear anybody laughing.

I even helped Duke carry the canoe. And I guess that in just a couple of days now I could be a cat on a surfboard and stand up all alone, graceful and bold, waving my thin white arms.