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It was a clear, brilliant morning. Few footsteps had marred the small slip of sand in front of the Outrigger Canoe Club. Twenty or more Hobie Cats bobbed like sea-borne hobby horses at quiet anchorage. Only the custodian and the young beach attendant were at hand.

I arrived at 7:15, a touch ahead of the rest. Sat down on the sea wall and once again shook my head in amazement at the changes in the Waikiki shore line. Future shock is already here for those of us who grew up when the jungle was a quiet residential area and the Moana was the only high-rise, all six stories.

The other seven arrived shortly thereafter. It had been two years since all of us had been together for Duke's birthday. I had missed the last one and, of course, the reason for it all has now been gone for more than two years. In years past we would gather with Duke for the occasion.

It all started more than 25 years ago and lasted for just a few years. During that time a combination of nine young men paddled for Duke, primarily in Kamehameha Day and July 4th races off the old Outrigger Club at Waikiki and occasionally in the Ala Wai Canal. Of the original nine, eight are left. Along with Duke, Kenny Chaney is gone. The several combinations of the nine that made up senior-six crews with Duke steering never lost a senior-six race.

So, this day we gathered to josh each other on the beach about expanding waistlines and permanent pounds added in most cases, shortness of breath and hangovers in others.

With eight, we decided on two four-man crews and carried a pair of canoes to the water.

Jimmy Pflueger, Tom O'Brien, Thad Exstrand and Tom Arnett took one boat. Jack Beaumont, Jim Fernie, Bob Bush and I were in the other.

The paddles were heavy work paddles, not the specially-made white-ash blades we used to feather in the forties. The canoes were fibreglas moulds, with fabricated outriggers. But the old rhythms of blades in, blades out, the sharp cadence of change calls

were all the same. The canoes didn't leap through the water as they once did to our youthful strength, but we kept our heads up and didn't bang the hulls because we knew that's what Duke expected and never had had to demand.

Somewhere off Queen's Surf we pulled up, jumped into the water and held the two ama's together, scattering plumeria on top of the clear aquamarine water where the wind picked them up and carried them away. Pflueger said a short prayer to Duke (our special God-Man) that was so clean and unfettered it started tears like an unexpected sharp pain will, and we all muttered our "amens" not really looking at each other.

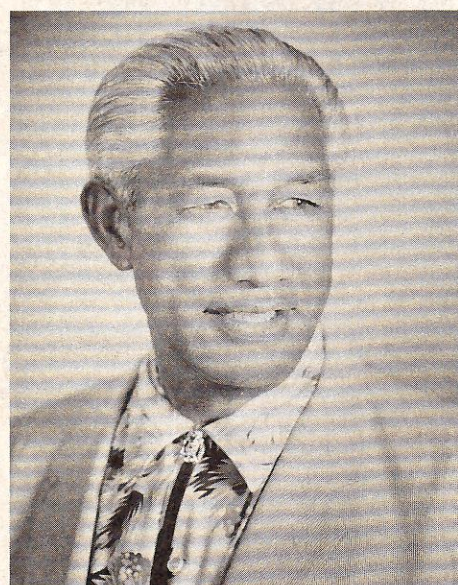
Then, the "do you remember the day the old man did so and so, said such and such" type chatter began. And with it warm chuckles, bright laughter and the spiritual unity of having been part of something rare and unique that will never be again. And, in the comfort of the memories we hated to leave.

Paddling back into the wind was hard. It had been two years since I had held a paddle, but as we approached the club, the raggedness left the boat. The reach and entry lengthened, whirlpools and white water came off the blades and the canoe came alive for a matter of two minutes or so. It was enough—the old pride was maintained and we kept our faith with Duke.

A quick shower, a hearty breakfast and much pleasant catch-up conversation followed. We broke up with promises to get together more often and soon, which remains to be seen.

Why? Simply, we were Duke's boys. We shared the experience of living and working for Duke in the agonies of training and the glories of victory. His presence was enough to inspire us then. His skill at the steering paddle and his incredible strength and endurance when he was in his mid-50's shamed us into greater efforts. He made us better than all the rest for a brief period of our lives. That's a rare gift for which we are forever grateful. •

—Carlos Rivas



THE DUKE'S BIRTHDAY

EIGHT KEEP THE
FAITH WITH DUKE