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Princess rests in her car seat on the way to veterinary hospital before passing away on the morning of March 10.



My Lahaina hotel was situated eight feet (2.5m) above sea level on the island of Maui.

A Dog's Tale: Wagging Goodbye

Text by Bret Gilliam

As I write this Japan struggles to deal with the aftermath of a 9.0 earthquake and devastating tsunami wave that obliterated entire areas of the country's northeast coast. At this time we know more than 12,000 persons have died and at least another 15,000, remain missing.

By a unique series of circumstances, I found myself directly in the path of the same tsunami as it raced across the Pacific to hit Hawaii. For me, it was a collision of tragedies on several levels. The morning of March 10 began as I was gathering up my diving gear and photo equipment in my oceanside hotel in Lahaina, on Maui. I was on assignment to conduct a topside and underwater site inspection of a remote offshore area along the western lee shore of Lanai, a nearby island. I'm a litigation consultant and expert witness in the diving and maritime fields and on this occasion I was hired to survey and photograph an area known as Shark Fin Rock where a diving fatality had occurred in 2007.

I was to meet with renowned oceanographer and big wave surfing pioneer Professor Rick Grigg, Ph.D., of the University of Hawaii, who would accompany me on the boat trip. Just as I was grabbing my bags to meet Rick, my cell phone rang. It was my wife Gretchen calling from

our home in Maine with very sad news. Some dear friends of ours, Jim and Pamela Graham of Dallas, had just suffered the death of their beloved dog Princess only minutes before. She'd died during an operation to correct an obstructive breathing disorder that affected her chronically as she aged.

For those of you who know me, I'm the quintessential dog lover. In fact, many would say that I like dogs more than most people. There's just something deep in a dog's makeup that compels me to become passionately and emotionally attached to my canine friends in a way that's difficult to articulate. For reasons that I can't explain, I'm able to detach sufficiently from the loss of humans to endure their passing, but when my dog friends die, I completely crumble in grief. I guess I think that it's the duty of us humans to protect our animals and make certain that nothing happens to them. Even if we take extraordinary measures and spare no expense, we still feel such a devastating loss and always ask ourselves if somehow we could have done more. I know... I'm a total wimp.

Princess resided with the Grahams whom I had originally met back in March of 1975 when they were on their honeymoon in St. Croix. I taught them to dive through my first diving operation called V. I. Divers Ltd., and we've been friends ever since. We share time in our various homes as well as trips all over the world. I'd known Princess for nearly a decade and she had a special place in my heart. Whenever I was with her, she spent the time in my lap or curled up next to me. When I got the news,

immediately I choked up and the tears began. I managed to ask Gretchen to send my condolences to the Grahams and hung up the phone. It took 10 minutes to pull myself together before meeting Rick in the lobby for the trip to Lanai. I didn't want a macho Waimea Bay surfing legend and distinguished scientist to know I'd been brought to my knees in grief over the death of a friend's dog.

Restless Sea

The ocean was odd that morning. I'm used to storms, hurricanes, and all sorts of bad weather at sea where I've spent my whole life and professional career. That day was bright sunshine and clear skies but the trade winds had reversed. The swells were steep, confused, and blocky with little period between waves, so for nearly two hours we pounded our way over to Shark Fin Rock. Once there, we were almost completely protected within a bay. Vertical cliffs over a thousand feet high rise from the water and we eased into position so I could dive over and secure us to a permanent underwater mooring. We decided to complete the underwater phase of our work first so we geared up for a dive that saw us traverse the shallow pinnacle down to about 100 feet (30m) at the bottom of a precipitous drop-off. At 74, Rick remains an active diver and surfer as well as one of the world's top oceanographers. He's remarkable and a hero of mine since my teenage surfing days in the mid 1960s. I was thrilled to meet him in my legal work decades later and since then we've worked several cases together and shared some great times.

We rendezvoused underwater; Rick with his sketch slates, compasses, and diagrams to chart the bottom topography, and me with my camera. That phase completed, we surfaced 40 minutes later and commenced another procedure, releasing green dye in the water to measure the relative drift direction and speed of the prevailing current, which was another factor in the fatality under investigation. Rick handled the dye, taking the compass bearings and azimuths, and also served as timekeeper while I shot photographs of the long stream of green trailings that marked the current's path as it moved offshore. Finally, I shot images of the topside area. Then, we re-packed our gear for the trip back to Maui.

Out of the bay's protection we were again pounding into the steep swells, though we were distracted from this discomfort by frequent sightings of humpback whales that surfaced nearby to check us out and blow a hello as we cruised through their neighbourhood. Nearing Lahaina, the lee calmed things down... thankfully. At the dock Rick had to rush off to catch a flight to Oahu. Back at my hotel a lady was selling Hawaiian leis of fresh tropical flowers. Spontaneously, I bought one in memory of Princess and to honour her passing that morning. In the moment I returned to the waterfront where I waved down a boater to ask if he'd mind taking me offshore to set the lei adrift with the tide and as the sun set. He was a dog lover. He understood. And so we motored out to sea.

As I cast the lei into the water, the kind stranger recited this brief verse with me:

Remembering

As my spirit leaves this bow
Remember that I am with you now
I am the waves upon the sea
Your smiles and tears are full of me

I am the island winds that blow
I am the evening stars that glow
I am the rainbows in the sky
The morning light, the clouds up high

A part of you I will always be
My name is Princess
Remember me...

It seemed appropriate so I added a few words that are part of the mariner's tradition to mark a loved one's passing, and for burials at sea.

The Ship Passes

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship departs the harbor and spreads her sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength and I watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says, "There, she's gone."

Gone? Gone where? Gone from my sight... that is all. She is still as large in mast and spar as when she filled my eyes departing her anchorage. She is just as able to bear her load of heavy cargo to the place of destination. She is still just as grand and elegant bent to the wind hurrying her onward.

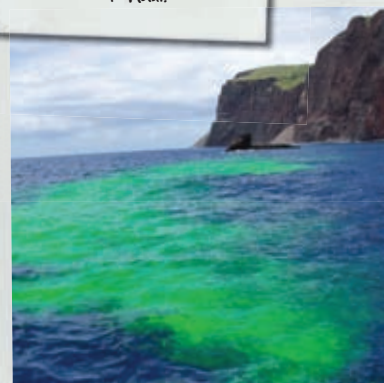
Her diminished size is only in me, not in her.

Just at that minute when the one at my side laments, "There, she's gone," there are eager eyes watching her coming on a new horizon beyond us.

And other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "Here, she comes!"

Tsunami Warning

I returned to my room on the third floor and fell asleep, physically and emotionally exhausted. Later, about 10:30 p.m., a piercing siren went off just outside my balcony. I nearly levitated off the bed from a deep sleep. I turned on the television news to learn of the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan. All of the Hawaiian Islands were on emergency evacuation alert. The siren was our cue to move to higher ground before the tsunami's ETA at 3:00 a.m.



Marker dye allowed us to track current direction



Author Bret Gilliam, left, and noted oceanographer Professor Rick Grigg of the University of Hawaii.



The Maui sunset as I set Princess's lei off to sea.

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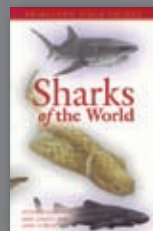
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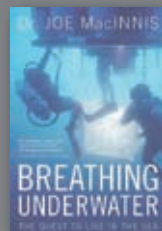


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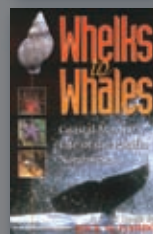
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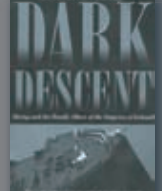
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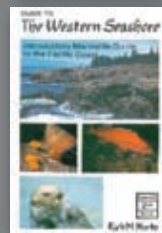
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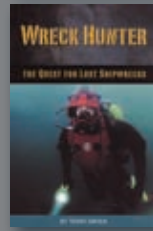
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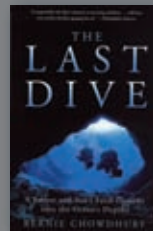
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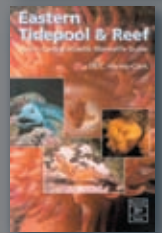
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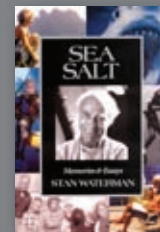
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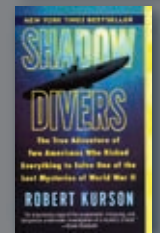
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The lee bay where Shark Fin Rock is located is tranquil before the tsunami.

All Photographs Courtesy Bret Gilliam

Chaos ensued as the town of Lahaina worked to evacuate thousands of people in less than five hours. You can't imagine the anxiety and total craziness as people fled in cars, on mopeds and bikes, and on foot; whatever would get them to higher ground. I watched the tsunami track on TV and decided I'd be safe enough in my third floor hotel room and so declined to be evacuated. I was one of only two people who stayed in the hotel. Another gentleman, 75 years old, remained on the seventh floor.

At 1:00 a.m. I went down to the lobby to let the resort manager know that I was going to stay. He graciously accepted my decision but advised that the police might oblige me to evacuate. Again, the shriek of the tsunami warning siren sounded and it was just then I noticed a puppy, terrified and cowering under a counter. Knowing that the wave would likely drown the little dog I spent nearly a half hour coaxing her into my arms. Back in my room, I hoped we'd be reasonably safe.

When the wave hit at 3:21 a.m., it was pitch dark but you could hear the shriek of the oncoming water. It was about 10 feet (3m) high in some areas where it surged almost half a mile inland, causing extensive damage in some areas where the cleanup will take time. The evacuees spent the night in cars or out on the ground and weren't able to return home until nearly noon the next day, Friday March 11. The entire town of Lahaina had been empty... a literal ghost town.

I'm OK, You're OK!

In the morning, I went out to see the damage, my new puppy friend bounding eagerly along with me. As I walked the shore, she became excited, barking and jumping against the trunk of a palm tree, and there in its branches, up near my room, hung the lei that I had set adrift for Princess. It had been carried back to the island by the tsunami and it appeared undamaged though tangled in the palm fronds about 12 feet (3.5m) off the ground. It shimmered and waved in the morning breeze and as the puppy madly wagged her tail I realized it was in perfect cadence with the lei's motion.

I think Princess came back to watch over me and was wagging at me to say, "I'm okay, glad you are, too." It remained hanging there and through the day people commented about the mysterious lei that had survived the tsunami. I think it inspired a whole bunch of people who were coming down from a terrifying night.

As my newest best friend, the puppy, bounced into my arms I noticed her collar had a phone number etched into a tag. I reached into my pocket for my cell phone and dialed it.

A distraught young woman answered and broke into tears when I told her I had found her dog. She thought I meant its dead body. But I assured her that her pet was fine and it had spent the night with me in bed and was eager to be reunited. The woman had been evacuated from her home and separated from her beloved puppy by sirens that caused the frightened animal to run away. Luckily, providence led her to me. The woman set a new land speed record to the hotel and I passed the puppy to her. We shook hands in silence. Nothing needed to be said.

I finally got out of Hawaii late Friday after the airports reopened, arriving home Saturday evening, having been awake most of 54 hours. My own dog Duffy jumped excitedly to welcome me home. It was the first time that I could really get news of the terrible destruction in Japan and parts of Hawaii. USA Today reported that, "Hawaii officials estimated that the powerful tsunami generated from the Japan earthquake caused tens of millions of dollars in damage to ports, roads, and homes in the state and expect massive declines in tourism as a result. The tsunami swept through the islands before dawn Friday and flooded some coastal businesses, hotels, sank boats, and tore apart piers and infrastructure. The worst damage occurred in Maui and the Big Island of Hawaii."

It was reported that when the tsunami hit the vertical face of the cliffs at Lanai, seawater and debris rose more than 100 feet (30m) above sea level. Rick Grigg and I had been there just 10 hours before it hit.

Dogs are my favorite things in life. They are our best friends. Although they sometimes leave us before we're ready for them to go, I do think we will catch up with them later. Princess caught up with me that night and stayed to greet me the next morning. It's nice to know I had a friend along looking after me... 🍀