

Tom Barnett, The Last Thing I Thought I'd Be Doing

California, for a young man in Kansas City, Missouri was an exotic and faraway place. My father, Ray Barnett Jr., dreamed of coming here, and after serving in World War II, he did. I was two years old when we moved from San Francisco to Studio City, a suburb of Los Angeles. We lived across the street from ex-Santa Monica Lifeguard and Sons of the Pioneers founding member, Bob Nolan. It was 1955 and we listened to cowboy songs at night and on the weekends we hit the beach. Dad got into spear fishing before wetsuits. As late as 1976 he held a North American spear fishing record for a Pargo. He completely embraced the ocean culture, loved Hawaiian music and would go to the early surf films at the local high school auditoriums in the San Fernando Valley all the way up into the 1960's. Although my dad never learned to surf, big wave pioneer Mike Doyle was one of his heroes. When I was nine years old he got me a subscription to surfer magazine and I devoured every copy. The summer of my eleventh year, Dad was between jobs with lots of time on his hands, and he took me to Dana Point for surfing lessons where I met Mickey Munoz. He's a little guy, only about 5' 6" tall. But to me, he seemed like a giant after all the pictures I'd seen of him riding Waimea. One of his protégés taught me to surf at Doheny before the Dana Point Harbor ruined the place.

We also spent a lot of summers at Zuma Beach, and my father made a point of singling out the men on the somewhat primitive Lifeguard stands. He would remind me that these great men (There weren't any female ocean Lifeguards at the time) were not pool Lifeguards, but real water men; real heroes to be revered and never questioned. I was awestruck and intimidated at the same time. How could I ever be like those guys? As it happened I got into diving, surfing and competitive swimming, but never thought much about ocean Lifeguarding until 1972 when dad suggested I try out.

I wasn't ready. The tough looking, khaki clad permanent staff, a lot of Ex WWII and Korean War vets, scared me to death. Although I'd raced well in the pool and surfed a lot, (with a wetsuit) the swimming test in the ocean, to say the least, took my breath away. I was one hundred and thirty five pounds of skin and bone and was shocked at the pain of the 56 degree water. The cold and the melee of the other applicants sent me back to the beach without completing the event. I couldn't face my father and we just sort of let it go. I continued to surf and train, coached swimming, tried college, played music professionally, and generally moved on with my life. But that cold spring morning always ate at me.

Ten years later I was back at college in San Diego for a BA in History. Dr. Arthur Verge, the now famous Lifeguard/historian, was working on his graduate degree and we ran into each other at the college pool and trained together. It was February 1982, and the previous year I had driven a cab, shoveled cement and operated heavy equipment. He asked me what my plans were for that summer. I told him that I had not a clue. He suggested beach Lifeguarding, as I had been swimming fairly well at the time. I told him, no way. I wasn't fast enough, young enough or tough enough to handle the cold water. He said: "Nonsense! You can acclimate yourself to the cold. Just do a couple of tryouts and see how it goes. It's the greatest job in the world!" Thanks to Art's encouragement, I made the test for San Clemente State Beach that March. I was the oldest rookie at age twenty nine and somewhat of an anomaly at the academy in Huntington Beach. After fifteen years in San Clemente, I took the LA County Lifeguard test again in 53.6 degree water and finished 12th. Again, I was the oldest rookie to date, at age forty four. My redemption was complete.

That was March of 1997. My dad had died two months before. Unfortunately he didn't live to see me working the beach at Zuma where he introduced me to my future. Now I have two boys of my own and they visit me frequently at my permanent station in El Segundo in close proximity to my home in Westchester. I owe my dad a special thanks for introducing me to the California surf culture that I am now so much a part of. However, equal thanks goes out to Dr. Verge, one of those people who, with a kind word of encouragement, offered at the right place and time, altered my life's course inexorably for the better. Thanks again Art, for helping me to overcome that cold spring morning in 1972.