

Back to the Beach

By Scott Tinley, Del Mar

Ed. Note: Scott Tinley has been a waterman all his life. Over 20 years ago he did some lifeguarding, some surfing, some paramedic work and then discovered a new sporting event that would change his life, the Triathlon. For years Tinley ruled this event, especially the most grueling version, the monstrous Ironman. After this illustrious career as a professional athlete began to wane, Tinley returned to the sea. In the spring of 2000 he signed on as a part-time lifeguard with the City of Del Mar, "to keep his feet wet." The following are his reflections on duty at one of the outlying towers in Del Mar, 25th Street.

It was a tower. A tower not unlike the corner parapet walled lookouts of a medieval castle or maybe a World War II bunker set inside the moist and dank earth on a high hill overlooking a South Pacific archipelago. But the difference was that this tower was meant to save lives, not end them.

The views of the surrounding sea would garner millions if a luxury home were to replace its idyllic and tactical location. The lower confines were sparse, a few cabinets filled with first aid supplies, an oxygen tank with accompanying face mask, the requisite porcelain sink for cleaning up everything from sand in the eye to bone deep lacerations as a result of razor sharp board fins. Utilitarian at best, the lower room was reserved for the efficient task of aid, repair and if need be, resuscitation of life itself.

When you gave the kids a tour, you showed them a bottle of 'jellyfish juice' and you showed them the fire pole you slid down when heading off to a rescue but you never took them up. For that place was sacred and necessary and at times....surreal.

Upstairs, with its wall of polarized glass, it's bank of radio communication linking the tower to main dispatch, fire, police, coast guard and inhabitant worker's amorous liaisons, its old wooden captain's chairs and its ancient but efficient refrigerator was a thing of unparalleled beauty.

You climbed the steep spiral staircase, opened the sliding glass door and walked out onto the wooden deck that wrapped around the tower like the rings around Saturn and there in front of you, in all her majestic and moody magnificence stood the entire Pacific Ocean.

You could watch and wonder about every visitor, consciously sizing them up as a non-event, a victim or a happy hour date. It was part of your job to pre-judge and the better you were at it, the more lives you could save. But it was the tower that gave you the power of observation. That and the 50 x 100 binoculars that sat on your lap when not at your eyes.

On a good day, you could read the CF numbers off of a ship's bow 3 miles out to sea. On others, when the fog came in on Robert Frost's "little cat's feet," you had to rely on gut instinct to sense trouble in your waters, your world that the tower bequeathed upon your conscious and your skills.

And while the building itself was nothing special to look at, when you arrived in the morning, a mug of steaming coffee in one hand, the keys to a poor swimming kid's life in the other; and you climbed those stairs, surveyed your domain, pulled your jacket zipper up tight against the cool morning air, turned the radio on and called HQ to tell them Tower 25 was now 10-8 and stepped out onto your perch of responsibility, you could not think of any other place you would rather be.