

Making the Tough Decision Not to Go

**By Captain Troy Emhoff
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"It was certainly the hardest decision I have ever made as a lifeguard."

Editor's Note: The following is another close-up account of the harrowing conditions near Santa Cruz November 21, 2001.

After rescuing two surfers along the Municipal Wharf, Lifeguard II Mike Park and I set out for one more patrol of Steamer's Lane before calling it a day. We had just talked with one of the last tow-in teams on Personal Water Craft (PWC's) at the "third reef" area when the rescue call at Mitchell's Cove was initiated. Quickly I accelerated the throttle and cut through a small channel between third reef and the slot during a lull in the sets. When we got to the opposite side of the break, suddenly the reality of the situation set in.

It was about 5:00 PM and just starting to get dark. A haze began to develop as it always does with a swell of this size. Looking up the coast, I could see the site of the rescue just about a half-mile away and immediately called on the radio to a vehicle with its emergency lights on. I wanted to get a better update and confirm the victims had been sighted because we had little time to spare. So often, these types of calls are initiated with little information and it isn't until emergency crews arrive on scene that we get a clear understanding of the situation.

I waited for a report and continued my size-up. The haze was turning into a fog, it was getting darker every minute and we had no good report on the victims. So I began to think of turning back. Immediately, I reminded myself of how difficult it would be for anyone to swim or paddle offshore to reach the victims, not to mention bringing them back to shore. It would be a short 5-minute ride down, 2-3 minutes to pick up the victims and then 5-6 minutes to return to my present position. I began asking myself, "do I have 15 minutes before it gets dark or the haze turns into a thick fog?"

Then the thought occurred that taking two victims in the boat through Steamer Lane at 20 feet with increasing fog and darkness simply was not a safe option. To go outside and around the Lane would require us to go out to sea at least one mile. With no compass, GPS or running lights on board, I finally made the tough choice to turn back and leave the surfers. It was up to the other team members to find a way to get them in.

As we continued back to the City's main beach to land the boat I could hear all the radio traffic and the difficulty lifeguards were having in locating the victims. I began second guessing myself. Yes, it would be dangerous to continue, but that is what we often do. I could have grabbed them and been out of the area in fifteen minutes if everything went smoothly, but normally it doesn't. However, it was too late now to change my mind. I had to live with the decision I had made.

We found the Harbor Patrol's boat on the other side of the Lane and told them there was no way we could continue with the restricted visibility. The meeting ended abruptly when a set came through and they powered out to sea to clear the waves and we ran in to shore. Not more than 5 minutes after our meeting we heard the Harbor Patrol also cancel due to conditions.

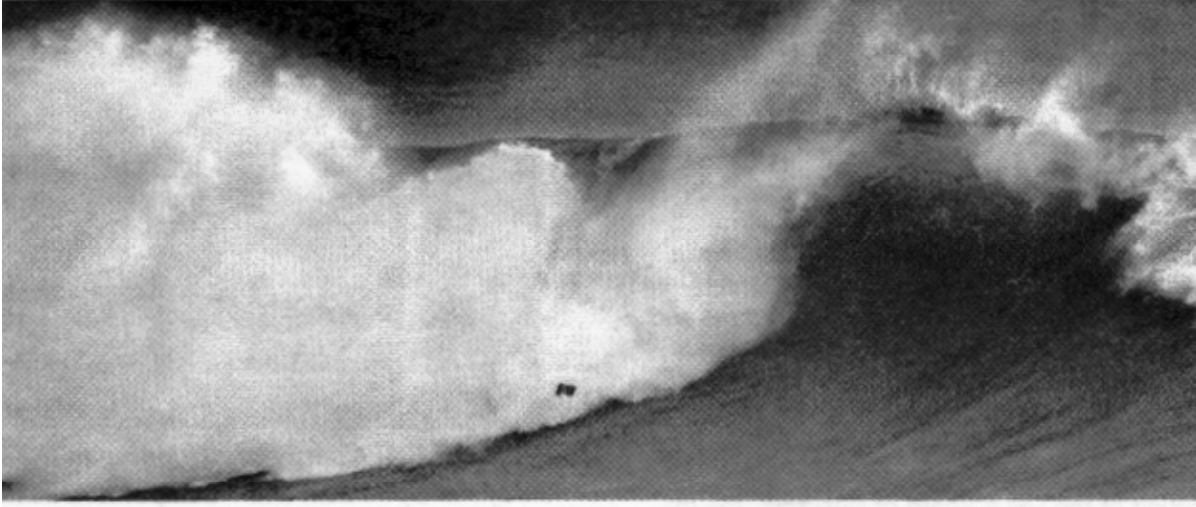
At this point the haze had turned into a thick fog as expected but now it was joined by darkness. We were still nearly three-quarters of a mile off the beach and we weren't sure where we going to land. The best point of reference I could see was the green harbor entrance beacon, so we took a straight heading towards the light. A minute later I heard the "Mayday" call go out by the harbor crew and I got a sick feeling in my stomach because I knew the conditions they were facing. They said they took on a huge wave and I immediately thought of what our fate would have been if we were in the same position, given the fact we were in a small inflatable boat with no navigation lights or instruments.

When I reached the harbor entrance, Park looked at me and I told him I had to cancel. He agreed, even though we both felt at the time that we could have taken a chance and made both rescues and gotten out of there. The risk was too high for us and I had to do what I preach to my staff all the time. RESCUER SAFETY FIRST! That night continued to be difficult. There had been a report of a third

surfer in the water off the cliffs and we searched for hours with spotlights. The thought of finding a body on the shore the next morning when I may have been able to get to that person had I pushed a little harder was difficult to deal with. However, I knew my decision was right and was later backed by the Harbor Patrol's offshore encounter with that huge wave.

It was certainly the hardest decision I have ever made as a lifeguard. We always teach new lifeguards that if the conditions are unsafe, don't go. It's an easy thing to say, but hard to do. This story is intended to describe one of these situations and how even though we were very competent in the water, we had to make the decision to turn back because it put us both at too much risk. Remember: RESCUER SAFETY IS ALWAYS THE HIGHEST PRIORITY!

Editor's Note: The two victims mentioned in this report got in safely.



Giant waves pound Santa Cruz, Thanksgiving, 2001. Photo by Shmuel Thaler.