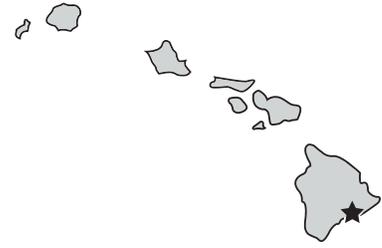


## TSUNAMI INTERVIEW FROM HAWAI'I ISLAND



**Speaker:** Michael Sterns

**Year of event:** 1975

**Location:** Halapē, Hawai'i

**Age at time of event:** 16

**Experience:** Michael Sterns was a Boy Scout at Halapē during the 1975 tsunami

*Yah that was our annual trip. Our troop was Troop 77 and we was based out of the Hilo Methodist church and we used to go down there, that was just like our annual trip. ...And the trip going down was quite exciting itself.*

*Um the years that we went before.... I believe it would be on a Saturday that we would clean the coconut grove. Halape was a like an oasis in itself this coconut grove out in the middle of no place you know with this huge 1,000 foot Pali in the background, ocean you know to one side. The Pali to the other side and it had this Small Island off of it. And then as far as vegetation, all it had was just this coconut grove. All around it was all lava just different types of lava around it. So it was quite barren around it and it was just literally like an oasis like you would see in the desert except this was by the ocean in Hawai'i with lava around it not sand. And it had a little sand beach. And then we set bonfires at night... And so that's what Halape was like.*

*And all it had was a small little shed that was for the adults. Wherever we went if there was a cabin or a shed it always went to the adults, to the leaders, where we boys always made our own little rough-it wherever we could find a place that was nice enough to sleep on and had enough place where we could hang, you know get ropes and get the tarps. We wouldn't use tents; it would be just open tarps. And it was sandy and then we would collect the prawns and made fires and whatever twigs we could find from maybe vegetation when we would make fires and cook our meals, usually at night. Usually morning and lunch was dry meals. And in the back of Halape they had this crack and they had brackish water.*

*And it was like when we used to go down there in the early times, nobody else would be down there, just would be us. So it was really neat you know we would have the whole place to ourselves. But this last time we went down in '75 before the tsunami came; it was being discovered by '75. And so that long weekend, when we got down there were other parties that were also coming down. And so by that time I was the oldest of the boys and so I was the senior patrol leader, which is the highest standing you can get before you become an assistant after you turn eighteen, if you decide to continue on with Boy Scouts. And so I took the boys most of all the boys except for one, the scoutmaster's son.*

*Because other people were coming, so it was like getting kinda crowded at Halape. So we opted to let them stay and we go, so I took the boys and took them down to Boulder Bay, which was the first time we ever did that, we usually always stayed right there in the coconut grove. And so um that's where I ended up with the boys for two nights before the tsunami came.*

*All I remember is that at least three other groups. And one of them I do know because... they came down on horses, they were fishermen. And then there was another group that was camping...that ended up down at Boulder Bay next to us. We ended up in the shelter, I believe I guess cause we were first there...*

*Timothy Twiggsmith, Val Allen, Nole Lou, and Lee Thompson, so there was five of us that went to Boulder Bay. Me being the oldest, and then I left behind, there was two scoutmasters, Mr. Moore, Mr. White and Mr. White's son, David, um and uh Dr. Mitchell, who was a surgeon, a local surgeon here in Hilo. And then another person um a friend of Dr. Mitchell's, I believe from Oahu. He was a policeman, so there was five.*

*We just basically set up camp...like I said it was a lean-to shelter. And it had a tin roof on it and it had a frame below the roof, you know to put the roof the iron roof on it. So whenever we could we would hang our packs up. So we would have little ropes that we would tie on to our packs and put it over whatever we could, whether it was a tree limb or on this rafters and hang our packs up. And then tie our shoes we had you know full on hiking shoes that came up you know above the ankle. And as far as I can't remember, what we did as far as from there till the tsunami. You know, we pretty much, it was just kind of relaxing, if you wanted to go swimming you could swim pretty much unless it was, unless it was work morning, we were pretty much were free to do what we want to do.*

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*...as was just a pretty normal night, going to sleep. And all I can remember as far as I know afterwards it was a moonless night, so it was a dark night. We were all asleep, as far as I knew, I was asleep. We got awoken by the first earthquake, because there was two. The first one what they say was over 5.0 on the Richter scale, so that's a pretty good jolt. And when you're...kinda close to the epicenter. You felt it pretty good.*

*Well, it was just a good jolt, and got us up and got our tent in and um, then afterwards it was like ok, go back to sleep, cause we grew up in a land of earthquakes, so it wasn't that big of deal. As far as that size number even though it was a good jolt, it was like ok that's fine, now let's go back to bed.*

*Then the second earthquake came, which was over 7.0, now that's a lot bigger! And that's the biggest that any of us went through, and that was like, it was like you couldn't even stand. And they didn't call it Boulder Bay for nothing because on the inside of Boulder Bay was that 1,000 foot Pali.*

*...everything was just shaking, like mad in a 7.0. I told the boys to get behind the shelter. Because all I could imagine was this boulder coming down Boom, Boom, BANG!*

*You know [laughing] and then I mean you could hear the boulders coming down, there was boulders definitely coming down. And we are talking about boulders; we are not talking about rocks we are talking about BOULDERS!*

*It just sounded like boulders coming down a 1,000 foot Pali...[chuckling] That's the only way I can describe it, I can't really have another analogy to describe it to so. But all I knew was boulders were coming down. I told the boys GET BEHIND THE SHELTER! Because that's the only protection we had. And, and I couldn't even stand, I mean it was like get, I got behind the shelter and I was like I was on the ground. You know I couldn't really move get up or if I wanted to go walk. It was like get behind the shelter, Boom that's it. Can't go any further it was just shaking like mad.*

*Since I was the oldest boy, I said to the boys, I said let's get on our boots and head to Halape and check in, you know with the adults. It was worthy enough to do that because of just the jolt was just so much, you know so we're over there on our tied packs trying to get untied our shoelaces from our back pack frames; so were facing ...our backs are to the ocean, and were trying to untie it and for whatever reason I don't know but usually were quite prepared because that's the motto and we had we had good troop leaders that really did instill that in us that be prepared, we were always prepared for pretty much whatever that we would come against.*

*...but this trip was like, I don't know for whatever reason, nobody had a flashlight, the only flashlight we had was somebody had a penlight flashlight. Now this is a dark night, a moonless night, and all we had was for five people from that one person had a little penlight flashlight to see to untie our packs from our frame. [chuckle] So we are trying to do that and all of a sudden I believe it was Val Allen went LOOK! And I looked back and had water that came right up to the shelter, all you could see was white water come right up to the shelter. So that really got our attention [chuckles].*

*...because we were already in the back of the area of the lean-to shelter.....this is where we go our own separate way. All I can remember is what I was doing, it was like every man for himself, but it was like it came natural. It wasn't like oh were going to do this, were going to do that. It was like it happened too fast! There's the water, now what are you going to do? And so Val ended up climbing the rock wall, I ended up following him. And uh, by the time I got to the, the top of the rock wall and the post that was there in the corner, the corner post, one of the four corner posts, I got onto that, and by the time I got onto that, the big wave came [slaps his hands] and hit us, hit the shelter, the water it could have been the ceiling you know the, the uh roof with all the rafters and stuff came down on my head; that's probably now that I'm thinking about it—I never really thought about it. I always thought maybe I hit something along the way like maybe the water tank but maybe that was it. Maybe it was just the roof coming down on my head. I remember something hitting my head cause you're in the water now. And just Boom, Boom, Boom everything happened so fast.*

*And you're just going with that action. And according to Val Allen, who made it away from the shelter on top the roof area, said that he remembers me after the first wave, there was another wave that's coming we didn't know. I'm just saying between, that I was bobbing up and down the water saying things that I don't remember. So I was semi-unconscious. How I stayed afloat semi-unconscious, I don't know, till today all I can explain to you. You know cause I know swimming you gotta dog paddle at least to stay afloat. I literally was thinking, I wanna die fast, I wanna die fast, I wanna*

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*die fast. Because I thought I was going to die and all I, all I didn't wanna do was die, slow and painful you know. So that's what I'm going through, this sixteen-year-old teenager boy is saying to himself as he's going with all the debris. You can feel the debris, you can feel the water and everything and going through the tumbling of the big wave heading inland. And so, but I didn't know... I was heading inland. I am thinking all this, and then all of a sudden the wave started to recede. And I felt it receding, and...my instinct just grabbed for anything I don't want to go recede out to the ocean. And so I'm just, I just grab for anything.*

*So I must have been right in the front...cause...maybe that's why I really felt I was right in the front I wasn't in the wave. I was more, so in the front of the wave feeling all that I was feeling as far as the rocks and the debris and everything, and so when I grabbed I grabbed on to land I just popped myself up, it was like boom boom I'm up, no wave, me, dark, no glasses. Because I, cause I wore glasses. But anyway... I have no shoes, cause we never got on our boots we never got that far. I got on shorts, I got on a shirt...*

*So and then sunrise was probably close to between 6:30 and 7 during that time. So you're talking about sunrise not until between 6:30 and 7...and you've got that Pali wind coming down. [chuckles] And you're all wet, and yet I had to take off my shirt, put it on ...I had a big gash on my head that I need to get it on you know. So I'm over there like that and I hook up first with Val Allen, then we call more and I hook up I think with, Timothy Twigsmith after that and it's us three. And I just tell them we gotta get away from the water.*

*Because what if something happens again, what if we have another earthquake and another tsunami. So we headed for the hills, but the hills were quite a distance away. Because now another part of this epic started where we had stay away from this 1,000 foot Pali with boulders that could come down and crash us, and the water, you know and so and get to high ground. We're here, Halape was here, the Pali was here, the water was here [gesturing] and we had to head this way to get around the Pali up towards where...where the hiking trail comes around, where you can see Halape... from there it would be 7 miles up to Ke Puka Nene. And one guy... he had a busted up knee, and you could like see the bone beneath that bone area and stuff like that, that's how bad he was. I had a bad head injury, and then my legs were all busted up from going with the water and the rocks and everything like that, so I was quite a mess. Val Allen he was fine, Timothy he was fine as far as injuries. And, so we walk together after we hooked up with the three fishermen and made it. And once we said this is it. We'll stay here. We made kind of a new kind of a trail marking along the back side of this 1,000 foot Pali were we put ahu's, made these stone markers, trail markers. So anyway um that's the picture of us when we were together, I believe it was Hilina Pali, it was all foggy.*

*I said "wait, wait, I dropped my shirt" cause it was a constant "Come on Mike, come on Mike," "wait Val, wait Val." you know cause he could see. I couldn't see! So um, and I just, well forget it. So I just left my shirt there and just put my hand over my head. So by the time I got there, I had no shirt, just shorts no shoes. You got the cold morning wind coming down from the Pali and the mountain. And so we're just shivering and waiting, come on sun come up, we are just looking at the horizon, waiting for the sun to come up, come on sun, cause we didn't know what time it was. I didn't have a watch, nobody had a watch.*

*So the sun came up and right after the sun came up, there was a plane that came overhead. And what I heard later on, it was this guy that went to go check out the eruption. Because on that day the same day that earthquake created also an eruption that happened just for a short time. So he went up to see it and I guess on his way back he headed makai down towards the ocean from up mauka towards the mountains...and he just started flying and he started seeing horses in the water. The horses that brought down these people you know ended up, ended up in the water.*

*But everybody was down by Halapē area and Boulder Bay cause there was this group at Boulder Bay which I don't know if they headed to Halapē afterwards. So we saw this helicopter pick up people, you know get people as far as what it looked like getting people. And hauling them out. But now we're, we're now about a mile away from Halapē, and we're only seeing it from a distance, from, from you know up the hill. So um, so Val who wasn't really injured, and who had eyes and everything else. I couldn't do anything, once I sat that was it, it was like that was it for me I can't go any further. So we opted, and said Val you go down and tell the people we're here. ■*