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Catastrophic Mortality in Hawai'i: An Update

TWENTY YEARS AGO, a paper in this journal listed 112 disasters that had occurred in Hawai'i prior to 1969, each of which was responsible for the loss of five or more lives.¹ The list included tsunamis, storms, floods, earthquakes, landslides, volcanoes, explosions, fires, marine and air disasters (including many to ships and planes traveling to or from the Islands), railroad and motor vehicle accidents, riots, mass murders, and air raids. Together, these 112 events killed approximately 5,575 persons between 1778 and the end of 1968, including 2,500 in the Pearl Harbor attack alone.

During the two decades since publication of the original article, the estimated toll has increased appreciably. Nineteen events missed in the 1969 compilation have subsequently come to the author's attention, and additional information has become available on nine of the disasters already described in that report. Thirty-one new disasters have occurred since December 1968 through the end of 1988. Altogether, these 59 events have increased the all-time catastrophic death total by approximately 340—about 214 in events previously missed, 297 in disasters since 1968, and a

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net downward adjustment of approximately 171 in revisions to earlier estimates.

These 59—plus one non-Hawaiian catastrophe of local interest—include the following events.

BEFORE 1969

November 1790: A great explosive eruption of Kilauea Volcano incinerated part of Keoua's army *en route* from Hilo to Ka'u. The 1969 article cited an estimated death toll of 400, first reported by Reverend Sheldon Dibble. William Ellis, however, writing about the same time, quoted native informants as saying that only 80 persons perished.² The correct number thus remains in doubt; splitting the difference would produce an estimate of 240.

1801(?): The Hualalai eruption, variously dated 1800, 1801, and 1803, killed two Hawaiians, a mother and her infant. The earlier compilation erroneously stated that only the 1790 and 1924 eruptions resulted in any deaths.³

November 13-24, 1813: Five men were drowned or otherwise lost after the sailing vessel *Lark*, out of New York, was demasted and capsized in a gale near the Islands. The survivors were taken to Kaho'olawe.⁴

February 25, 1815: Seven Hawaiians were lost while attempting to haul the Russian vessel *Behring* onto the beach at Waimea Bay, Kaua'i. The *Behring*, originally the American vessel *Atahualpa*, had struck a reef during a "fresh gale" on January 31. The seven were killed when a cable snapped and lashed out.⁵

1834-1835: On June 1, 1834, the *Victoria*, commanded by Captain Samuel Dowsett, sailed from Honolulu for the Pescadores Islands. When Dowsett failed to return after a year, Ladd & Company chartered the brig *Waverly* to go in search of him and his crew. Reaching Strong's Island, the *Waverly* was cut off by natives, its captain and crew were slain, and the brig was burned. The death toll from these two losses was not recorded.⁶

November 1, 1839: According to Stephen Reynolds, “Ing’s sail boat was lost—and seven Natives drowned—two got ashore by swimming—after the boat upset,” apparently in Honolulu Harbor.⁷

May 10, 1840: The earlier article, quoting *The Polynesian*, noted the sinking of the schooner *Keola*, with 30 to 40 persons aboard, off Kaho‘olawe. Only four survived by swimming 25 miles to the nearest land. Another newspaper account, however, stated that 29 were aboard. Reynolds recorded 29 on the vessel and 25 deaths, but gave the date as April 24, 1840. Reverend Cochran Forbes wrote that 36 were aboard. All four sources agreed that only four persons were able to swim to safety.⁸

June 18, 1840: Stephen Reynolds wrote in his journal that “A large Volcano has broken out on the East Side of Hawaii about sixty miles from the sea. . . . The lava was so sudden upon the Natives that about thirty were lost.” Apart from his questionable mileage estimate (no part of the Big Island is more than 28.5 miles from the Coast), Reynolds probably overstated the death total: both Titus Coan and William D. Alexander stated that no lives were lost.⁹

August 1852: Twelve persons died after the schooner *Marianne* capsized in a squall between Kaua‘i and Honolulu. Many of the Hawaiian passengers, some with children on their backs, managed to swim safely to Anahola, six miles away.¹⁰

1860s: The Hilo packet *Liholiho*, a large coasting schooner, sailed for the guano islands and was never heard from again.¹¹

April 2, 1868: The Big Island was struck by a concatenation of disasters—a massive earthquake, a great mudslide, and finally a tsunami—which together took the lives of 79 Puna and Ka‘u residents, 47 from the tsunami, 31 from the landslide, and one in a rockfall triggered by the earthquake. The 1969 article reported a total of 81 deaths.¹²

December 9, 1890: Hamakua received eight inches of rain in three hours, and six persons drowned.¹³

January 16, 1893: The Hawaiian bark *Lady Lampton* was wrecked on a reef 40 miles from Palmyra Atoll, but all hands eventually reached safety. The earlier article, based on the initial accounts, reported five missing.¹⁴

January 1899: The overturned hull of the four-masted schooner *Nomad* drifted ashore at Upolu Point. The *Nomad* had sailed from Shanghai 15 months earlier, bound for Puget Sound, with 13 persons aboard. It was thought that the schooner had been wrecked off the North American coast the previous spring and had eventually drifted to Hawai'i. Only one body was recovered.¹⁵

1900: The bark *Northern Light* and its entire crew vanished on a voyage from Puget Sound to Hawai'i.¹⁶

January 27, 1911: Six of the eight persons aboard the schooner *Moi Wahine* drowned when their craft was struck by the lightship tender *Kukui* between O'ahu and Maui. The skipper swam for 20 hours to Lāna'i, thinking his entire crew had perished. Two years later, however, one of the missing crewmen showed up, saying he had swum safely to Molokini. The 1969 article missed this second survivor.¹⁷

June 22, 1916: A Ka'eleku Sugar Company work train was derailed on a 25-foot trestle near Hāna, Maui, plunging into Haneo'o Gulch. Out of 50 men on the train, five were killed and 27 were injured.¹⁸ This was the only railroad accident in Island history to take as many as five lives.

December 15, 1916: The former sailing schooner *Allie I. Alger*, with a crew of seven, left Honolulu on a voyage to Yokohama and disappeared.¹⁹

August 11-19, 1927: The Dole Air Derby, an airplane race from Oakland Airport to Wheeler Field, eventually took 11 lives—three on the Mainland prior to the race, five over the Pacific during the race, and three among search planes after the race. Four of the eight starting planes crashed on take-off (none fatally) or had to turn back. Only *Woolaroc* and *Aloha* reached O'ahu, and *Golden Eagle* (with two aboard) and *Miss Dorian*

(carrying three) vanished at sea. Two search planes were subsequently lost, causing three further deaths.²⁰

December 5, 1934: The 400-foot British tanker *La Crescenta*, with a crew of 30, disappeared a few hundred miles north of Hawai'i, reportedly on December 5, *en route* from Port San Luis, California, to Osaka.²¹

February 27, 1935: Ten persons died as a result of an O'ahu cloudburst, five of them by drowning and five from suffocation. The latter, all members of an 'Aiea family, perished when a pillow fell on their stove and caught fire, and their cottage, tightly sealed against the storm, was quickly depleted of all oxygen.²²

October 1937: On October 24, the Chinese-owned, British-registered tramp freighter *Haida* put out from Seattle for Kahului and Hong Kong, with a crew of 26 Chinese and a Norwegian shipmaster. It vanished soon afterwards, never reaching Kahului, perhaps because its sulphur cargo exploded.²³

June 22, 1943: A C-47 cargo plane crashed above 'Aiea Heights, killing 10 crewmen.²⁴

April 1, 1946: The worst tsunami in Island history took 159 lives. This total, recently estimated by Doak Cox after exhaustive research, replaces earlier estimates ranging from 142 to 173.²⁵

November 22, 1965: Mrs. Maggie Young drowned five of her children in a bathtub in their 'Aiea home.²⁶

SINCE 1969

January 14, 1969: Twenty-eight men aboard the nuclear aircraft carrier *Enterprise* were killed by an explosion during training exercises 70 miles southwest of Pearl Harbor.²⁷

July 5, 1969: Seven passengers were killed in a two-car automobile accident at Kamehameha Highway and Puuloa Road.²⁸ The worst previous automobile accident, also responsible for seven deaths, had occurred in 1944.

December 26, 1969: Twenty-six members of the 40-man crew of the ammunition ship *Badger State*, en route from Washington to Vietnam, drowned after the ship exploded and was abandoned 580 miles north of Midway.²⁹

July 3, 1970: Five persons died in a three-car collision at Ho'olehua, Moloka'i.³⁰

June 13, 1971: An Air Force C-135 jet transport, flying from American Samoa to Honolulu, crashed 700 miles south-southwest of O'ahu, killing all 24 persons on board.³¹

August 3, 1971: Six persons were killed when a truck ran a red light and rammed a car at School Street and Kam IV Road. Fatalities included the truck driver, three in the automobile, and two pedestrians.³²

December 8, 1971: Five persons were missing and 31 were rescued in the sinking of the Danish freighter *Heering Kirse* 200 miles northeast of Midway. The ship was sailing from Mexico to Japan.³³

February 22, 1972: Four were dead and four more missing in the crash of an Alii Air Hawaii, Inc., Beechcraft D18S off Lā'au Point, Moloka'i.³⁴

June 9, 1972: One person was saved and 20 were missing in the burning of the fishing boat *Kaigata Maru No. 10*, which had left Kahului June 8 and the next day caught fire 250 miles northeast of Johnston Island.³⁵

May 20, 1973: All six passengers aboard a twin-engine Beechcraft G-50 Bonanza were killed when it crashed near Kamehameha Highway while approaching Honolulu International Airport for a landing.³⁶

July 24, 1973: Five of the nine persons aboard a twin-engine Beechcraft, belonging to Alii Air Hawaii, Inc., and chartered by Panorama Air Tour, Inc., were killed when it crashed into the reef shortly after take-off from Honolulu International Airport.³⁷

February 22, 1974: Eight of the 40 men aboard the Italian tanker *Giovanna Lolli-Ghetti*, bound for Lāhainā from Los Angeles, died when it exploded, burned, and sank 900 miles northeast of O‘ahu. The 32 survivors were brought to Honolulu.³⁸

March 23-24, 1974: Five persons were drowned in high storm waves, four being swept to sea at Sunset Beach on March 23 and a fifth drowning when his sailboat capsized outside Hale‘iwa Boat Harbor on March 24.³⁹

April 11, 1974: All 11 aboard a Beechcraft Twin Beech, chartered by Panorama Air Tours Co., Inc., were killed when the airplane crashed at the 7,500-foot level of Mauna Loa 31 miles southwest of Hilo.⁴⁰

April 19, 1974: Five persons drowned in flooding streams, one in the Wainiha River on Kaua‘i, three in Hale‘iwa on O‘ahu, and one at Schofield Barracks.⁴¹

February 4-6, 1976: The 17-man crew of the 146-foot Japanese fishing vessel *Houei Maru No. 5* vanished after the ship ran aground on the reef of Kure Atoll during a storm.⁴²

June 24, 1976: Eight of the 10 marines in a Marine Corps UHIN “Huey” helicopter were killed when it crashed four to five miles from Pohakuloa airfield on Hawai‘i.⁴³

April 13, 1977: A rented Cessna 310 carrying five persons disappeared off Waikiki.⁴⁴

December 9(?), 1978: The *Holo Holo*, a 90-foot motor vessel with 10 persons on board, disappeared in high winds and rough seas off the Big Island while sailing from Honolulu to Kawaihae.⁴⁵

February 11(?), 1979: The *Sarah Joe*, a 17-foot Boston Whaler with five men aboard, reported engine trouble two hours after leaving Hana on a fishing trip and failed to return as scheduled. Almost a decade later, on September 10, 1988, the battered craft was found on a beach at Taongi Atoll in the Marshall Islands. A nearby shallow grave, marked by a driftwood cross, contained remains later identified as those of one of the lost crewmen. The

fate of the other four and the identity of the person who dug the grave remain unknown.⁴⁶

May 25, 1979: Ten Hawai'i residents were among the 275 persons killed in the crash of an American Airlines DC-10 immediately after taking off from O'Hare Airport, Chicago, for Los Angeles.⁴⁷ Although not a Hawai'i disaster as defined for this paper, and thus omitted from the statistics, this crash is mentioned because of its local interest.

November 24, 1979: Five persons were killed and four were hospitalized in a head-on collision between a sedan and a pickup on Kamehameha Highway, north of Wahiawa.⁴⁸

January 8-10, 1980: A severe winter storm resulted in five deaths on O'ahu and one each on Maui and the Big Island.⁴⁹

May 18, 1980: Six Marines and one Navy corpsman were killed and two other Marines were severely burned when a CH-53D Sea Stallion helicopter crashed soon after take-off, about three and a half miles east of Moloka'i Airport.⁵⁰

December 5, 1981: A twin-engine Beechcraft carrying skydivers planning to parachute into Aloha Stadium crashed into Pearl Harbor near the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial, killing 11 of the 12 persons aboard.⁵¹

July 24, 1982: Five persons were killed and two others were hospitalized in a three-car crash on Kunia Road near Wahiawa.⁵²

June 16, 1983: All 14 crew members of a Navy P-3 Orion patrol plane were killed when the plane slammed into a ridge between Kalalau and Honopū Valleys, Kaua'i.⁵³

January 15, 1985: An Air Force HH-53 helicopter trying to lift a sick sailor from a merchant ship 540 miles north of Honolulu crashed into the vessel, killing all seven helicopter crew members.⁵⁴

December 23, 1987: A twin-engine Piper Chieftain operated by Panorama Air, carrying eight persons, disappeared west of Moloka'i.⁵⁵

June 9, 1988: Five were killed and three others were critically injured in a head-on collision of two cars on Kalaniana'ole Highway near Sea Life Park.⁵⁶

July 9, 1988: All six occupants of a station wagon were killed in a head-on collision with a pickup truck on Queen Ka'ahumanu Highway south of Kawaihae.⁵⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Robert C. Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality in Hawai'i," *HJH* 3 (1969): 66-86.
- ² Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 69; William Ellis, *A Narrative of Tour Through Hawaii, or Owhyhee* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette, 1917) 156 and 187; Charles H. Hitchcock, *Hawaii and Its Volcanoes* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Gazette, 1909) 165-66.
- ³ William T. Brigham, *The Volcanoes of Kilauea and Mauna Loa on the Island of Hawaii*, vol. 2. no. 4 (Honolulu: Bishop Museum P, 1909) 8 and 14; Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 69.
- ⁴ Washington Irving, *Astoria*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (1836; Norman, Okla.: U. Oklahoma P, 1964) 476-79; Russ and Peg Apple, "Shipwrecked at Kaho'olawe," *HSB*, 17 Jan. 1976: A-11.
- ⁵ F. W. Howay, "The Last Days of the *Atahualpa*, alias *Behring*," *51st Annual Report, HHS, for the Year 1932* 70-80; Jim Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* (Seattle: Superior Publishing, 1977) 35-40.
- ⁶ The Journal of John N. Colcord 1793-1845, ts., 22, AH; *HAA* 1882 11; A. Grove Day, *History Makers of Hawaii* (Honolulu: Mutual Publishing of Honolulu, 1984) 37.
- ⁷ Stephen Reynolds Journal 1823-1842, ts., 24, AH.
- ⁸ Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 72; *Sandwich Island Mirror & Commercial Gazette* 15 June 1840: 4; Stephen Reynolds Journal 40; *The Journals of Cochran Forbes* (Honolulu: HMCS, 1984) 83.
- ⁹ Stephen Reynolds Journal 46; W. D. Alexander, *A Brief History of the Hawaiian People* (New York: American Book, 1899) 231; Brigham, *The Volcanoes of Kilauea and Mauna Loa* 54.
- ¹⁰ Mifflin Thomas, *Schooner from Windward* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1983) 32.
- ¹¹ Anon., "Hawaiian Maritime History," *HAA* 1890, 66-79 at 78; Thomas, *Schooner from Windward* 32.
- ¹² Doak C. Cox, *Tsunami Casualties and Mortality in Hawaii* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i, Environmental Center, June 1987) 11; Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 67 and 69.
- ¹³ *DB* 12 Dec. 1890: 3; *PCA* 13 Dec. 1890: 3.

- ¹⁴ *HAA* 1894 135; Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* 115-16; Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 73.
- ¹⁵ *PCA* 1 Feb. 1899: 2; Constance Elaine Zillgitt, "The Schooner Nomad's Diary of Death," *PP*, Feb. 1936, 12-3; Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* 99 and 101. Zillgitt gives the schooner only three masts and dates its arrival at Kohala as 1893. Gibbs dates it as early 1898.
- ¹⁶ Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* 101.
- ¹⁷ Thomas, *Schooner from Windward* 117-20; Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 73.
- ¹⁸ *HSB* 23 June 1916: 1; *HSB* 28 June 1916: 3.
- ¹⁹ Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* 102-03
- ²⁰ William J. Horvat, *Above the Pacific* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Aero Publishers, 1966) 76-86.
- ²¹ Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* 118.
- ²² *HSB* 28 Feb. 1935: 1; *HSB* 2 March 1935: 1-2.
- ²³ Gibbs, *Shipwrecks in Paradise* 118-19.
- ²⁴ *SSB&A* 7 Apr. 1974: C-8.
- ²⁵ Cox, *Tsunami Casualties and Mortality* 15-30; Schmitt, "Catastrophic Mortality" 68.
- ²⁶ *HA* 23 Nov. 1965: A-1, A-2; *HSB*, 8 Jan. 1988: A-16.
- ²⁷ *HA* 20 Jan. 1969: C-1; *Time*, 13 June 1969: 19.
- ²⁸ *HA* 7 July 1969: A-1.
- ²⁹ *SSB&A* 4 Jan. 1970: A-7; *HA* 6 Feb. 1970: A-1.
- ³⁰ *HSB* 3 July 1970: A-1.
- ³¹ *HA* 14 June 1971: A-1.
- ³² *HA* 4 Aug. 1971: A-1; *HSB* 6 Aug. 1971: A-1.
- ³³ *HA* 10 Dec. 1971: A-1, A-6; *HA* 18 Dec. 1971: A-8.
- ³⁴ *HA* 23 Feb. 1972: A-1; *HSB* 18 Sept. 1972: A-7.
- ³⁵ *HSB* 19 June 1972: A-4; *HSB* 23 June 1972: A-20.
- ³⁶ *HSB* 21 May 1973: A-1.
- ³⁷ *HSB* 24 July 1973: A-1.
- ³⁸ *HSB* 23 Feb. 1974: B-3.
- ³⁹ *SSB&A* 24 March 1974: A-1; *HA* 25 March 1974: A-1.
- ⁴⁰ *HSB* 12 April 1974: A-1; *HSB* 10 May 1975: A-1.
- ⁴¹ *HSB* 20 April 1974: A-1.
- ⁴² *HSB* 12 March 1976: A-2; *HA* 15 March 1976: A-6.
- ⁴³ *HA* 25 June 1976: A-1.
- ⁴⁴ *HSB* 15 April 1977: A-2.
- ⁴⁵ *HSB* 13 Dec. 1978: A-1, A-4; *HA* 22 Dec. 1978: A-3; *HA* 20 Jan. 1979: A-6; *HA* 23 April 1979: A-1, A-4.
- ⁴⁶ *HSB* 12 Feb. 1979: A-1; *HA* 13 Feb. 1979: A-2; *HA* 13 Oct. 1988: A-1, A-4; *HA* 20 Oct. 1988: D-9.

- ⁴⁷ *HSB* 26 May 1979: A-1, A-4; *SSB&A* 27 May 1979: A-1, A-4, A-18; *HSB* 5 June 1979: A-1.
- ⁴⁸ *HSB* 24 May 1979: A-1.
- ⁴⁹ *HSB* 9 Jan. 1980: A-1, A-2; *HSB* 10 Jan. 1980: A-1, A-2.
- ⁵⁰ *HA* 19 May 1980: A-1, A-3; *HSB* 19 May 1980: A-1, A-2.
- ⁵¹ *HA* 7 Dec. 1981: A-1, A-3.
- ⁵² *HA* 26 July 1982: A-5.
- ⁵³ *HA* 17 June 1983: A-1.
- ⁵⁴ *HA* 16 Jan. 1985: A-1.
- ⁵⁵ *HSB* 24 Dec. 1987: A-1, A-6.
- ⁵⁶ *HA* 10 June 1988: A-1, A-4; *HSB* 10 June 1988: A-3.
- ⁵⁷ *SSB&A* 10 July 1988: A-1, A-4.