

THE WHALE WARRIORS:

NEW AFTERWARD

by Peter Heller

TAIJI, JAPAN

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Hours before daylight, Charles Hambleton and Louie Psyhoyos lowered themselves hand to hand, tree to tree, off a rain-slick cliff. They dropped to a ledge hemmed by brush, high above a narrow cove. Swiftly, they unshucked tripods and freed the cameras from their waterproof cases. They worked without light, by feel. I handed down a duffel full of camouflage and followed. I could hear Charles click the *FLIR* cam onto its mount. Forward Looking Infrared is a military grade thermal video camera and he would sweep the tiny beach and the rocks along the water for patrols. Security here was very tight. Razor wire ribboned across the access trails, and when the killing began the entire inlet would be tarped off. Still working fast, the men tore leaves off the brush behind them and wire-tied them to the legs of the tripods.

It began to rain again. A cold drizzle that blew in from the North Pacific. It dripped out of the leaves and tapped on the hoods of our slickers.

"The rock-cam is weighted down, right?" Louie whispered.

"Yeah, it should be cool."

A half hour earlier we had placed two other cameras at water's edge. One was in a case fashioned by George Lucas' lab, Industrial Light and Magic, to look exactly like the rocks of the cove. Another was a hot rodded bird's nest, which Charles hung from a tree. I thought he was pretty agile for a rock star: he was the former lead guitarist of the *Samples*. But he was also a master sailor so it shouldn't have surprised me. Louie had been a top photographer for National Geographic for two decades and had recently given that up to make this movie. Their company, named OPS, for Oceanic Preservation Society, was based in Boulder, Colorado. The two had read *The Whale Warriors*, and invited me to come to Japan. I had gotten an assignment to cover the story from a magazine, gone to the law enforcement store in Denver and bought an all black SWAT outfit, (Louie had said they would supply the face paint,) and booked a ticket to Osaka.

We huddled together in the wind and rain. I told Charles "Feel Us Shaking" was one of my all time favorites; turned out he wrote the guitar part. We shivered and ate

Louie's chocolate bar. I could hear the swell breaking on the rocks below, and when I stood to shake off the chill I could see a navigational light, far off, blinking on some headland. The faint, intermittent spark kept time against the vast blackness of the sea and gave the night a sense of profound and lonely silence.

I was having fun playing commando journalist, but I was also filled with dread. Below us, just across a two-fingered inlet, was the Killing Cove, where 2300 dolphins and small whales are butchered every year. It's the place Allison and Alex had infiltrated in 2002, managing to cut the nets and free some 15 dolphins before the two were assaulted by fishermen and arrested. The killing here is part of a cetacean slaughter that is unregulated by the IWC, which has no jurisdiction over the smallest whales. The Japanese don't even have to pretend it's for scientific research. The government issues permits to fishermen and over 22,000 dolphins, porpoises, pilot whales and false killer whales are killed annually along Japan's coasts. The meat is sold to school lunch programs and grocery stores and is terrifically high in mercury. Independent random tests have found the dolphin meat to contain three to 3500 times the levels deemed safe by the Japanese Government.

Louie and Charles had shown me footage they had shot here in Taiji a year earlier. 13 small boats hunt the dolphins. Each boat has a long pole extended into the water and when they find a pod they bang on the poles, which confuses and scares the animals. It forms an acoustical net. They drive the pod into the narrow cove and net it off. The next morning at dawn, they herd them by twos and threes into the shallows. Babies, mothers, whole families. Divers in black wetsuits and old round facemasks grab individuals and drag them to the small gravel beach. Nooses leashed to a main line hang into the water. The divers, and fishermen in waders, grapple the tails into the nooses. The panicked dolphins blow and squirm. A man with a two-foot long t-handled spike wades over and plunges it just behind the blowhole. A gush of blood and the dolphin thrashes and shivers. She screams and tips over on her side into the water, unable to clear her blowhole, and begins to drown. All down the line other men are doing the same. The cove fills with blood. Terrified babies thrash around in it, driven crazy by the cries of their mothers. The dolphins tied to the beach quiver and writhe. If one of the fishermen thinks of it, he will wade over and cut a throat or spike one again. Many take half an hour to die.

Sometimes when they've corralled thirty or forty dolphins or pilot whales—another species of large dolphin—the whalers will dispense with the niceties and simply drive their open boats through the pod spearing and spiking. The wounded and dying tip and capsizes in the blood and some of the dolphins that are still swimming try to get under them with their noses and hold them up.

OPS was making a feature film about the killing called *The Cove*. They had a lot of

help from Ric O'Barry, the trainer of the dolphins for the old TV show *Flipper*, who had devoted his life to getting international attention to stop the slaughter—so far without much luck. Working closely with dolphins, he had never ceased to be amazed by their uncanny intelligence, emotions and communication skills. "I knew dolphins were self-aware 30 years before the studies confirmed it," he told me. "On the show there was a dock. At one end of it was the house where the family was supposed to live, and at the other end was Flipper. They didn't actually live there, but I did. Every Friday night I'd drag a long extension cord and TV set out to the end of the dock and Flipper would watch *Flipper*. She loved it."

In some ways, O'Barry felt responsible for the cruel harvest. He believed that it was his show that engendered an international love affair with dolphins. He believed that what actually drove the killing in coves like Taiji was the capture of animals that were culled from the slaughtered pods and sold to marine parks and swim-with-dolphin programs around the world. A prime female could net the fishermen \$10,000, and the broker who then sold her to the parks could get \$150,000. "If it weren't for the money involved in selling live dolphins," he told me, "this industry would have rightfully died years ago."

He had been sneaking into Taiji for the last five years to observe the killing--so well known to the locals he often had to drive through town in a wig and dress. He had shown video he had surreptitiously shot in the cove to Louie and Charles, and from the moment they saw it, they knew they had a subject for a movie. Louie also had a personal connection to the mercury issue: in the course of years of traveling and photographing the world's coasts and oceans, he had eaten tons of fish, and his blood levels for mercury were critically high. And Charles, as a world class sailor, had had a love affair with the oceans and with dolphins all his life. All three men believed that here in Taiji, and in other coastal communities that consumed cetaceans, another Minimata Scandal was in the making--thousands of people sickened, crippled or killed by mercury poisoning. But the greater issue of their movie was the alarming levels of mercury in *all* fish. Go on the Internet, they told me, look up FDA advisories for tuna fish, for sea bass and swordfish. You will be shocked. If people knew the danger, OPS believed they would stop eating seafood, period. And there was an even greater issue beyond toxic fish: what put most of the mercury and PCPs into the oceans was the burning of fossil fuel, the same engine that drove global warming. So their message was that we were all responsible for this poisoning of the sea.

I did not want to see the killing in person. Even in the pitch dark, the inlet below our perch felt like a black hole, like concentrated dread. In a few hours, killing or no, activists from around the world would drive up to the public beach at the head of one finger of the inlet and paddle surfboards out into the mouth of the killing cove. They would form a surfer's circle, or paddle-out for dolphins, which is the traditional

ceremony surfers hold for a departed comrade. Traditionally, flowers are tossed into the center and the surfers hold hands and send up a prayer for their friend's last big ride.

The gathering was organized and led by Dave Rastovich, a beloved Australian surfer who had founded an organization and website surfersforcetaceans.com. A few years ago, a dolphin had charged out of nowhere and saved him from an attacking shark, and since then he has worked hard to try and protect cetaceans. He had sailed on the Farley Mowat with Sea Shepherd in the Galapagos, and after some long conversations with Watson he had become galvanized in his activism. He figured that the only way to get the world to pay attention was to bring celebrities here to protest, and film it. He had invited Hayden Panettiere, the young star of the TV show *Heroes*, and Isabel Lucas, an Australian star. The two had traveled with a whale conservationist to San Ignacio Lagoon in Baja California, and had experienced breeding and calving gray whales at very close quarters for days. They both experienced a profound connection, and would never be the same again. Karina Petroni, top U.S. surfer would be there, as well as James Pribram, the pro surfer who has launched an eco-warrior project.

Japanese culture does not respect or understand banner waving protest, and Rastovich thought it would be more in tune with a ritualistic, tradition-bound society to perform this simple ceremony honoring departed souls. He considers dolphins to be the original and best surfers, and anyone who surfs will end up on a wave with a dolphin and know that it's true. He was quite sure that this would be the first time in history that a paddle-out was enacted for surfers who were not human. If I could get down off the mountain in time, I would join them.

By first light, the rain had stopped. We could just see beyond our hands, and we covered the cameras with leafy camo and dabbed on face paint and sat very still. The cove took shape around us. It was hollowed out of spires of rock. Their flanks spilled with gnarled trees. Mist tangled in the branches and shrouded the sharp spurs. Far below, waves crashed against the cliffs, and guard rocks fleeced with spume ran up to the shore like fleets of longboats. It looked like classical Japanese pen-and-inks I had loved all my life. The cove was a natural fortress, and I could see the two fingers: the one running away to our right that cupped the public beach, and the inlet just across, hidden from all other views but ours, where the killing took place. The sky lightened and the water flushed a muted jade green. Two large gold hawks drifted in lazy circles over our blind. It was one of the most beautiful coasts I had ever seen.

I was relieved. No dolphins swam against the nets. On the narrow beach lay the rolls of green tarps they used to shroud the inlet. There would be no killing today.

We had the paddle-out ceremony. Thirty of us paddled surfboards into the cove and tossed flowers and sent up prayers. Rastovich spoke some words about the thousands of dolphins that had died here, wishing them peace. It sounds a little hokey, but everyone had seen clips of the OPS footage and we sat on our boards just at the mouth of the killing cove and it was difficult not to look in there and overlay pictures of violence.

The cops came, of course, and took everybody's passport info, and some angry fishermen pulled up in their trucks and fumed and stomped on their cigarettes. But all in all it went without a hitch. That night at the hotel in Osaka everybody felt pretty righteous and relieved—no violence, no arrests, no blood in the water—and the participants had a party.

The next afternoon Ric O'Barry called from Taiji where he keeps watch on the cove and said a pod of thirty pilot whales had been driven into the inlet and netted in, and would be killed the next morning. I guess the whalers thought the international attention had come and gone.

Six of us went back. We drove most of the night in a crowded van. Just out of Taiji, in the first faint light, we pulled over and got into wetsuits. Now there would be blood. The fishermen would have spears and knives and they were known to get worked up and violent. When Allison and Alex jumped into the cove with dolphins, they were hauled out of the water by the throat and thrown in jail for weeks and fined.

The OPS teams had set up earlier in the night--avoiding patrols, going over razor wire with rolls of black carpet--and they had rigged a battery of cameras. Taiji is all about whaling—they have a whale museum with an aqua park behind, where dolphins captured from the cove perform tricks and tourists eat dolphin sandwiches. They have smiling dolphin statues and pictures everywhere. Just at dawn we parked behind a life-size bronze of a humpback with calf and waited for Charles, who called five minutes later: "They're killing! Go!" We sped to the public beach where we had been two mornings before. The six of us grabbed our boards from the van and splashed into the water, and we began to paddle as hard as we could toward the mouth of the killing cove. The plan was to perform another surfers circle before we were stopped by the fishermen or the police. O'Barry wanted the footage to air around the world.

We scraped over one net line and then it was forty yards of open water to the cove mouth. No boat appeared. We paddled past the rock corner and looked into the inlet. It was all blood. Thick and red, like paint. The dark bodies of two pilot whales floated in it, washed into the beach. And then I saw them: twelve or fifteen of the little whales

pressed in panic against a far net.

They huddled tighter as we got closer. They circled in terror, blowing hard. We stopped, circled and held hands. The blowing of the whales slowed. I watched the large dolphins, twenty yards beyond us, slow and mill. They spy hopped, lifting their heads out to look. Small babies nosed out of the water to peer at us. They calmed down. Half of their group had just been butchered in this water, many crying for a long time before they died. These whales were in shock. But they seemed to sense that we meant them no harm. Rastovich wanted badly to cut the nets, but we could see another net stretched across the cove 80 yards out, and another beyond that. All of these whales would be spiked within the hour.

We watched the remainder of this pod of pilot whales begin to flow against the net, their backs silvering in the long sun. We could hear them blowing. I sat on my board and felt tears stream down my cold face. This is what editors called going native, getting too close to a story. That was the farthest thing from my mind.

A boat cruised around an outer point of rock, a long, open motorboat. The fisherman throttled when he saw us. He skimmed over the lines of nets and wheeled dangerously close, standing, yelling. He motioned for us to go. I looked around our circle. Everyone seemed calm. The whaler revved his motor and tried to frighten us with the propeller. He came so close to Hayden's leg where she sat on her board that she had to pull it out of the way. Furious, he circled once more and headed to the beach.

We paddled out, not in. Closer to the whales. It was a bold move, as the local cops must be scrambling. In Japan you can be held for 28 days without being charged, and no one was looking forward to a free cell in Taiji. We were yards away from the pilot whales now. The little pod huddled against the net and we could hear them breathe fast, hollow blows over the slick water. We floated in the blood of their family. Hayden began to cry quietly. Then Isabel. Then Rastovich's wife Hannah.

Soon the boat sped out to us again, and this time there were four whalers aboard. They feinted with the prop. One yelled wildly, picked up a long forked pole, and jabbed it at the closest boards. He hit Hannah in the thigh, then shoved Hayden's board. Both women stayed calm, keeping their balance, and holding the circle. Behind them I noticed the pilot whales going crazy, thrashing against the net. Enough, Rastovich said. "Let's paddle in. Stay against the rocks."

We ran from the water, threw the boards in the back of the van, ducked to the floor and sped away. Forty-five seconds later sirens wailed and police cars flew past us, heading toward the cove.

Back in Osaka we all changed flights and left the country before the authorities decided to make someone pay.

At home, I was amazed at the press the protest was getting. *People*, CNN, AP, MSNBC, *Ellen*. Hayden was everywhere, a real-life hero. Ric O'Barry, who stood by the cove heartbroken and alone for so many years, was thrilled.

I wrote my story. When I tried to sleep the image returned: those 12 pilot whales swimming against the nets, watching us. I watched them back. There is a lot I want to communicate. A baby lifts its head. They are wondering why we are there, but they don't feel threatened. A boat approaches. I hear the motor like a snarl. The whales circle tighter, faster. I lie beside my sleeping wife and weep. Months later, I continue to be shaken by a grief whose power I can't explain.

Perhaps it is that the little group of whales spoke, to me at least, for the whole ocean. The oceans are dying. Like the pod in the cove, half of what was once vital in the oceans are gone. Half the coral reefs. 90% of the great predator fish. What remains is in great peril. This year, along the California coast, the Chinook salmon simply did not show up. Not in anything remotely like the usual numbers. The gray whales passing by, heading south for their breeding grounds in three lagoons in Baja, were shockingly emaciated. Whale observers and scientists wondered why.

I do not wonder why. These losses are happening at a faster and faster rate around the world. We are at the tipping point. Survivors in the future will ask us what we did. *What did you do?*

April 8, 2008

Zihuatanejo, Mexico

