

# THE DAY THE SEA WENT DOWN THE DRAIN

by  
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The water was pouring away from the beach. It was exactly as if someone had pulled a plug in the ocean and it was running down the drain. The water was full of people, screaming and yelling and thrashing about. Here is a minute-by-minute account of the rip-tide incident at Nauset Beach on Cape Cod one summer.

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If you are spending a summer day at the seashore, Nauset Beach at Orleans on Cape Cod<sup>1</sup> is just about the perfect place to be.

The Cape's bent forearm thrusts farther to sea than any other portion of the east coast of the United States. There is nothing between its outer beaches and the coast of Spain but the broadest expanse of Atlantic Ocean.

In recent years, ever-growing multitudes of vacationers have come to the Cape to visit the National Seashore Park, wander along the outer beaches, and swim and sunbathe on the rim of a vast expanse of sea and sky. Nauset has become one of the most famous ocean beaches in the nation.

On Tuesday morning, August 21, 1973, scudding clouds and patches of

1. Cape Cod, a peninsula in southeastern Massachusetts.

blue signaled clearing weather after an offshore northeast storm. At Nauset, early arrivals staked out their beach claims for the day with blankets, picnic hampers, and beach umbrellas. Soon kites danced in the sky. Beach balls flew back and forth. Toddlers constructed sand castles. Sunbathers settled down with books, lotions, and transistor radios. The first swimmers and bathers ventured into the ocean.

Surveying the scene from high wooden stands set fifty feet apart were Nauset's lifeguards.

The lifeguards, youthful, muscular, and deeply tanned, are used to being surrounded by a horde of admiring youngsters and teased by jokes such as, "You mean to tell me you guys actually get paid just to sit up there all day and watch the bikinis wiggle by?"

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From "The Day the Sea Went down the Drain" by Evan McLeod Wylie from *Yankee* (July 1974). Copyright © 1974 by Evan McLeod Wylie and reprinted by permission. PHOTO: Page 33, by Virginia Howell.

"That's the way it looks," admitted Guard Lee Anderson, "but on a busy day when there are 3000 people on this beach, we concentrate so hard we wind up practically cross-eyed. On this job, you don't sit around and wait for somebody to yell help. People who are drowning usually haven't got an ounce of breath left to call out. They're choking, gasping, and paralyzed by fear and exhaustion. You watch for them and you keep an eye on the ocean, trying to anticipate trouble. You take a special interest because when you're in the water with a panic-stricken, drowning person, it's your life as well as his that's on the line."

"The most important thing," says Gary Guertin, "is to understand the water. An ocean beach like Nauset is full of underwater sandbars, ledges, and currents. People are always talking about 'watching out for the undertow' and the 'big waves,' but the greatest danger is really in the currents. You have to learn to recognize them, and you have to learn what to do when you're caught in one."

Nauset's guards scan their beach constantly for currents. They close down all or part of the beach to swimmers if they see a strong current developing. However, they must cope with the fact that currents are constantly appearing, vanishing, and shifting. The rips (strong, narrow currents that flow out to sea) often form invisibly beneath the surface. They actually attract bathers because

they cause a break in the line of surf and form a deceptively smooth, calm pool of water which, until you're trapped, may appear ideal for swimming.

At 10:00 A.M. that morning, the lifeguards had inspected the beach and ocean. They had noted that fairly heavy surf that had been kicked up by an offshore northeast storm was dying down but still strong enough to warrant caution. Gary Guertin ordered a section of the beach closed off and directed his guards to make sure that bathers remained in shallow water. "Anybody in over his waist gets a whistle and a wave-in," he said.

At 11:00 A.M. Guertin went to lunch, leaving Lee Anderson at the Head Guard Stand. At 11:23 A.M. he was on his way to the stand, still munching on an order of french fries. Anderson, atop the stand, was scanning bathers and the beach with binoculars. Suddenly into the focus of his "glasses" popped the frightened face of a small boy. Anderson stared ("You get so you can read panic in just a split-second glimpse") and saw that the boy was "bobbing"—disappearing beneath the surface, emerging, and then sinking again.

"Gary," Anderson called. "I've got a 'live one.'"

In a flash he had laid aside the binoculars, dropped to the sand, and seized the rope of a yellow torpedo rescue buoy. Legs pumping like a football fullback, he sprinted through the beach

crowd, hurdled the first shallow incoming waves, and hurled himself into the water, swimming at top speed, towing the "torp" behind him.

"The adrenaline shoots through you," he says. "You go at terrific speed. I don't even remember hitting that cold water. I just went for the kid. I wanted to reach him before he disappeared and I'd have to dive to look for him. When I got to him, I could see that he was plenty scared and weak but a game little kid. He grabbed the 'torp' that I shoved at him.

"I've got you," I told him. "Just hang on. We're going back to the beach together."

With the boy in tow, Anderson swung around, looking for Guertin, who, following their established rescue procedures, would be swimming out to him with a lifeline to attach to the buoy. Together they would be hauled in to shore. The rescue was about wrapped up. Instead, to his astonishment, Anderson saw Guertin streaking past him through the water to rescue someone else.

Guertin's attention had been attracted to an older couple who were floundering feebly in the gathering rip current. With a third guard, Aldo Ghisalbert, Guertin reached the couple just as the woman lost consciousness.

"Aldo had the man, who, it turned out, was her husband," Guertin recalls. "I knew Anderson was busy with the little

boy. We all had to make it by ourselves. I could see the woman was in serious difficulty. As soon as I reached shallow water, I began to start mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and external heart massage. I laid her down on the beach. She had no pulse. No breath. I went to work on her. A fireman from New Jersey, who was vacationing, came to help me and so did a doctor. She was breathing again. I thought we were going to save her."

But then as he knelt on the sand, Guertin became aware that the beach had exploded in turmoil. He heard shouting: "Help! Quick! There's a lot of people drowning!"

The rip current had become a monster. Beneath the sea, somewhere offshore, an invisible dam seemed to have broken. Surging seaward away from the beach, a powerful current, composed of billions of gallons of water, carried with it scores of bewildered and frightened swimmers and bathers.

Jack Stockdale, who had been swimming close to shore, recalls, "We swam as hard as we could toward shore but we were drawn back by each wave. We saw three people swept past us."

"It was a weird sensation," says Forest Belvar of Waterbury, Connecticut. "It was like swimming against a stone wall."

Lifeguard Gary Guertin, who had plunged in to save the swimmers, says, "The water was pouring away from the



beach. It was exactly as if someone had pulled a plug in the ocean and it was running down a drain. The water was full of people, screaming and yelling and thrashing about. I took my 'torp' buoy and collected as many as I could. People pulled my lifeline in to shore and we began to lay them out on the beach."

Meanwhile, Guard Lee Anderson, who had been swimming toward shore with the small boy he had rescued, saw a body floating face downward in the water. He grasped the head by the hair, held it up, and found himself staring at a youth who apparently had drowned. "He was blue-gray and unconscious," Anderson says. "He looked like he'd been dead for a week. Then I thought I saw his pupils

dilate—a sign of life. I started treading water and giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. So now I've got the young guy by the hair, trying to hold his head out, and I've still got the little kid hanging on to my 'torp' like a little bulldog. The current is pulling us backward into the breaking surf. A huge wave crests right over us. I just have time to clamp my hand over the guy's mouth, and it crashes down and buries us. I need somebody to help me, but I might as well be on the moon. I saw two young girls swimming to help me, but they were swept right past me. I finally fought my way out of the current and reached the beach. A woman who must have been the little boy's mother or relative snatched

him up. He was okay, but the young guy still seemed almost gone. I left him with another guard, Mike Coughlin, and went back out to get the two girls who had come to help me.”

The current was moving like an express train. To one swimmer, it seemed “like a tornado in the water. It just sucked you in.”

Anderson reached the two girls and towed them in. He was exhausted and numb from his struggles in the cold water, but there seemed to be no end to the nightmare.

He glimpsed a young man flailing about in panic and swam out to him.

“I shoved the buoy at him and yelled at him to grab hold of it.”

“I can’t make it,” he gasped. “I can’t do it. I’m too weak to hold on.”

“Take the ‘torp!’” Anderson shouted angrily. “I felt,” he says, “that there was no time to fool around. The turbulence out there was terrible. Huge waves were smashing down on us and beneath the surface you could feel water tugging on you. A wave crested so high above us that I could look up inside it. Then ‘boom!’ it crashed down upon us. Not just water. Tons of sand, too, that had been stirred up from the bottom by the rip current and the surf. It was like swimming through a Mixmaster. I had the young guy on my buoy, and I kept kicking toward the beach. An older man came swimming toward us. I thought he had come to help,

but he cried out, ‘My son! You’ve got my son!’

“I spit out some sand and water and called, ‘He’s all right. I’ve got him.’ But when he hears the good news, the father faints right before my eyes. *He’s face* down in the water. Drowning! And now I’ve got two to take care of again. For gosh sakes! I said to myself. What kind of a day is this anyway? I grabbed him and held onto the boy on the ‘torp’ at the same time. I saw that people were trying to reach us.”

With the best of intentions but ignorant about the rip current, some of the bathers had formed a human chain. Locking hands, they extended themselves out to reach those who were struggling in deeper water. Their good intentions nearly cost them their lives. Anderson’s fingers had brushed those on the outer end of the chain when a wave broke over them. The links of the chain were broken—and now there were more people floundering in the water.

Somehow Anderson had clung to his father-and-son victims. When he shook the water out of his eyes, he saw two swimmers coming toward him with a surf paddleboard. They succeeded in getting the unconscious father on the paddleboard and brought him and his son to shore. Then Anderson took a buoy and rescue lifeline and went back in once more. He maneuvered until he had a dozen people clinging to the lifeline and

buoy, then gave a signal to the beach. A crowd on the other end hauled on the line and pulled them all to shore.

Sitting on the beach feeling about "wiped out," Anderson heard a woman crying that "my daughter is missing!" Once more he took lifeline and "torp" and swam out through the surf. He searched back and forth but found no sign of life. All victims of the rip had been rescued or had disappeared. Anderson had been working in the cold water for more than an hour and a half, and he felt exhaustion draining him. He signaled to the beach and, clinging to the buoy, was given "a dynamite ride" back to shore. Someone handed him a cup of scalding coffee. He tottered up the beach and fell to his hands and knees, feeling sick and dizzy. He dropped down in the beach grass and threw up coffee, sea water, and sand. He was shaken with a massive chill but then saw Gary Guertin working on victims and ran to help him. "It was a good idea," he says. "The running restored my circulation. My body heat came back and I was out of the shakes."

The lifeguards, battling to bring people ashore, could not begin to cope with the fear-stricken crowd and dazed, semiconscious victims strewn on the sand. Some were in serious condition. Fortunately, help arrived with dazzling speed. JoAnn Drake of the Nauset Beach staff had seen the lifeguards dash into the water and called the Orleans police

and fire headquarters. Within a few moments the Orleans Rescue Squad, headed by Capt. Ray Merrill, had reached the beach. "By the time I crossed the dunes," Merrill recalls, "there were six people stretched out on the beach and I could see many more in trouble in the water."

Merrill ran back and put in an emergency call for help from Brewster, Eastham, and Wellfleet. The towns of the Outer Cape are twenty to thirty miles away from the nearest large hospital, the Cape Cod Hospital, in Hyannis. They have learned to work closely together in emergency situations and have built up a mutual-aid system, linked by telephone and radio dispatchers. Their police, fire, and rescue squads are assisted by dozens of trained volunteers. Within a few minutes, additional off-duty members of the squads, alerted by the wailing of the Orleans town siren, were converging on the beach.

Soon Nauset swarmed with rescue teams armed with portable oxygen tanks, stretchers, and blankets. Several doctors and nurses who had been among the crowd of swimmers and sunbathers offered their services.

Cape Cod Hospital was alerted that a mass rescue effort was underway. Waiting teams of physicians and nurses stood by. As soon as it was deemed safe to move them, the more gravely affected victims were placed in ambulances and rescue

trucks. Local and state police set up road blocks for an open lane which gave ambulances and rescue trucks a straight-away, high-speed run to the hospital.

As police pieced together reports from the Cape Cod Hospital and interviews with families on the beach, it was finally established that, while upwards of fifty to sixty people had been trapped in the current, the combined efforts of lifeguards and rescue teams had miraculously averted a major tragedy. Only one person, Mrs. Edward Stephonatis of Watertown, Connecticut, died at Cape Cod Hospital, and her death was attributed to a heart attack. Several, including Dennis Ryan, the youth found floating by Guard Lee Anderson, remained in the Intensive Care Unit, but all survived. The missing eleven-year-old girl was found safe at the hospital.

By late afternoon, Nauset was back to normal. Late arrivals who had missed the excitement were frolicking in the portion of the water that the guards had reopened to the public. The huge rip

current had disappeared as mysteriously as it had appeared.

What caused the massive rip current at Nauset? Gary Guertin speculates that it was caused by the collapse of an underwater sand ledge about a quarter of a mile out from the beach. It had been built up by sand constantly being swept out to sea by smaller currents—perhaps it was like a cofferdam forty to fifty feet high—and then for some reason had suddenly collapsed, creating a powerful suction that pulled the water into it and caused the worst rip current in memory.

Guertin later learned that there was a tremor recorded on East Coast seismic scales that day. Perhaps, he surmises, somewhere on the continental shelf an undersea avalanche or small earthquake had sent out the tremors that caused the underwater dam to collapse.

People nearly died, he says, because they didn't know what to do in a "rip" or how to swim in the ocean.

"The ocean is a beautiful place to swim, but if you don't understand its dangers, you may die here . . . or on any ocean beach."