

I SAW THE BRAVEST ACT OF THE YEAR



Shirley O'Neill's frantic attempts to breathe life into her wounded friend failed. A few days later the saddened coed mourned at his funeral.



Here is an eye-witness account of a young girl's fearless rescue of her friend from the jaws of a man-eating shark

BY M/SGT. LEO P. DAY as told to John M. Ross

I KNOW the full meaning of the word bravery. In my 16 years with the U. S. Army I have seen many heroes in action—men who readily jeopardized their own lives to save a comrade. Even among soldiers, who train and prepare for sacrifice, it's always inspiring.

On Greenland, for instance, I saw men scorn disaster and trudge into a treacherous "white-out" to rescue buddies trapped in a blizzard that struck without warning. They had no assurance they would fare any better than their buddies, but that didn't stop them. I've always considered that incident a classic example of man's courage and willingness to sacrifice himself for his fellow man.

On the afternoon of May 7, however, I witnessed a display of heroism that overshadowed anything I had ever seen before. It involved not an army man, but a slender, pretty coed. But no soldier ever performed more fearlessly or gallantly, and the impact of her sacrifice was enough to leave one limp and breathless.

I had just finished my dinner at the Presidio at San Francisco, California, and was standing on the high, steep bluff overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and Baker's Beach, scanning the beautiful scene with a pair of field glasses. Down below, a boy and a girl—later identified as Shirley O'Neill and Albert Kogler, both 18 and classmates at San Francisco State College—were swimming. It was one of the nicest days of spring, and the youngsters had decided on a swim after classes. I wouldn't have noticed them but for a sudden terrible scream that shattered the stillness.

I trained my glasses on them and saw the boy thrashing about madly in a large circle of red, foaming water. A shark, judged to be a 500-pound man-eater, had attacked young Albert and left his left arm and shoulder mangled and bleeding badly. I knew that I couldn't get down from the bluff to help, and I felt sick.

I saw the boy motioning her back, but Shirley, ten or fifteen feet away, ignored his agitated warning. Instead, she quickly swam over to help him. Through my glasses I saw this slim girl struggle desperately to take her husky companion in hand as the circle of blood-tinted water widened. Again and again she tried to get his arms over her shoulder, but the boy had apparently become panicky from shock and the agonizing pain. Finally, she succeeded in cradling one arm under him and, swimming with the other, managed to tug him 150 feet to shore through swells two feet high.

(Shirley later told me that during the struggle to save him the boy fought her off while crying hysterically: "Help me. Please help me." Almost exhausted herself, she finally told him: "The only way I can help you is if you lie still on your back. Lie back and relax." He bravely gained control of himself then and remained quiet while Shirley brought him in.)

While Shirley was finishing her heroic rescue, I had rushed to my car and was driving down the half-mile road to the beach. The sight I saw was almost as startling as the drama I had just observed through my glasses. Going to the boy's aid while a shark lurked nearby would have been

heroism enough. And bringing in the body of a panicky, pain-racked victim would have tested a super-human to the utmost. But Shirley had not finished her work. Now she knelt beside her stricken friend, who was struggling for air, and breathed her own breath directly into his lungs.

When a police officer relieved her, Shirley still did not quit. Sensing that Albert was near death, she recalled a conversation she'd had with him in school one day. He believed in God, but he belonged to no particular faith. She bent low and whispered softly to him.

"Okay," he replied. "I love God. I love my mother and my father. Oh, God, please help me."

Quickly, Shirley ran to the edge of the surf, scooped up some sea water and returned. The crucifix she wore around her neck dangled significantly as she leaned over and let the water trickle out of her hands onto Albert's head, baptizing him in her own Catholic faith.

"Is that all right?" she asked him softly. The boy tried to nod. Then she slowly recited the Act of Contrition. Albert repeated it. When he finished, he lapsed into unconsciousness. Two and a half hours later, he died in a hospital.

I took this amazing girl to the hospital in my car. The doctors treated her for shock, although en route to the hospital she was calm and coherent. Her only concern was about the baptism.

"I hope I did it right," she said. "I hope I helped him some."

Her words almost made me cry.

I was honored to endorse as an eye-witness the mayor of San Francisco's recommendation of the Carnegie Medal for Shirley O'Neill, only the fourth to be awarded since 1955. She is the bravest woman I have ever known.

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