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Ian Lind: Kahoolawe 40 Years Later

Protests over using the island as a military bombing range galvanized the modern Hawaiian movement.

ABOUT 12 HOURS AGO • By Ian Lind 

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Monday, Jan. 4, will mark the 40th anniversary of the first landing on Kahoolawe to protest the island's control and use by the U.S. Navy as a bombing range.

On Jan. 4, 1976, several dozen people from across the state, most of Hawaiian ancestry, departed from Maui's Maalaea Harbor at dawn, destination Kahoolawe, then described on tourist maps as the Target Island. The peaceful protest was intended to call attention the destruction of the island, and to bring the broader challenges facing Native Hawaiians to the world stage.



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Ian Lind, front left, was one of a handful of Native Hawaiian protesters who took a stand against the military bombing of the island. He and others, including Steve Morse, front right, and Gail Kawapuna Prejean, were detained and taken to a waiting Coast Guard cutter.

Most of the group turned back after the small flotilla was intercepted en route by a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter and warned that any boats approaching the island would be trespassing and could be confiscated. But one boat continued on. Nine of us were quick enough, or lucky enough, to scramble on board as the small, open boat took off toward the forbidden island.

We were quickly dubbed the Kahoolawe Nine: Walter Ritte, Emmett Aluli, Ellen Miles, Karla Villalba, Steve Morse, Kimo Aluli, George Helm, Gail Kawaipuna Prejean and myself.

Six of us spent much of the day on Kahoolawe before being detained and escorted back to Maui by federal marshals who landed on the beach that afternoon under the direction of Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill Eggers. Helm, a talented musician as well as a thoughtful and articulate activist, left before the posse arrived in order to make an evening performance. And two — Emmett and Walter — were exploring the island when

the authorities arrived, and remained on the loose for several days before being caught and removed, making headlines in the process.

All in all, a modest but successful protest, it seemed at the time. The photographs I took that day show a few people on an empty beach at one end of a barren island, before being taken off in the custody of the federal marshals. Little did we know that it was the beginning of a movement that would make history.

To understand what happened requires going back to the beginning.

Back To January 1976

The Vietnam War had ended less than a year before. The American Bicentennial year was beginning. Gerald Ford was president. John Waihee, later to serve as Hawaii's governor, was looking forward to graduating from the new University of Hawaii Law School. The term "personal computer" was coined later in the year to refer to a little gadget called the "Altair."

Kahoolawe had been taken by the federal government as a bombing range during World War II, and bombing continued even after the wartime emergency had ended. People had grumbled about the Navy's bombing of Kahoolawe for years. Bombing practice rattled windows on Maui, leading to public complaints. A practice bomb made the news when it ended up in a cow



pasture owned by Maui's mayor.

But the bombing had never

emerged as a major public issue.

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Kahoolawe Niiha arrived on the beach with equipment,

food and water for several days.

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And then came the call put out by Charley Maxwell on Maui, inviting Hawaiian activists from different communities across the state to begin the Bicentennial by staging a protest that could elevate Hawaiian issues onto the state and national agenda. We would occupy the Navy's bombing range and stand tall against the island's continued slow destruction.

Kawaiipuna Prejean, director of what was then known as the Hawaiian Coalition of Native Claims (which later became the Native Hawaiian Legal Corp.) was one of those who receive the call. He in turn phoned me and several others, and we were off to Maui a few days later to join in.

I recall people gathered at a community center in Waikapu as they arrived on Maui the afternoon before the planned protest. I think there were close to 50 people who spent the night there preparing for a pre-dawn departure to the harbor, and on to Kahoolawe.

Moving between small groups of people talking late into the night, I listened in on their discussions of the issues confronted in their own communities. Some were challenging the closing of traditional access to trails and beaches in the face of unchecked development and the greed of private developers. Many had been part of ongoing challenges to the long failure of the Hawaiian Homes Commission to fulfill its mission of returning Hawaiians to the land. Others organized at the community level against poverty, homelessness, lack of educational opportunities and adequate health care.

Through it all, a common thread, a profound sense that Hawaiians carried more than their fair share of the community's social burdens, and that something had to be done.

And for that moment, thanks to Maxwell's initiative, Kahoolawe became the shared symbol.

Then, unexpectedly, Kahoolawe became the spark. The protest, and others that followed in rapid order, captured the public's imagination and, perhaps more importantly, the attention of a new generation of politicians.



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A Department of Defense police officer takes information from Karla Villalba and Ellen Miles. Kimo Aluli is in the background.

Amazing Momentum

The Protect Kahoolawe Ohana was formed, and first gave a modern expression to the traditional concept of “Aloha Aina.” It provided focus to a process of cultural awakening and recreation, a reclaiming of the best of the past, its values and perspectives. Its unique blending of cultural expressions and political action changed the discourse of Hawaiian rights and, in the process, paved the way for other issues and movements to come.

Ian Lind

And it led to an extraordinary expansion of Hawaiian political power and presence. Two years after that first landing, the 1978 constitutional convention created the [Office of Hawaiian Affairs](#) and gave traditional and customary Hawaiian practices constitutional protection. Leaders who emerged during the con-con — Frenchy DeSoto, John Waihee, and others — would have a profound impact in raising the profile of Hawaiian issues over the decades to follow.

And it didn't stop there. The PKO was relentless. It challenged the Navy in court on environmental grounds, and through a combination of legal and political pressures, along with dogged determination, eventually stopped the use of live fire on Kahoolawe in 1990. Just four years later, the island was returned to state control.

Looking back, it's amazing how much was set in motion by that first Kahoolawe protest, and it's equally amazing to realize how little has changed in other respects. The bombing has stopped, but the [Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission](#), established to administer and restore the island, desperately needs an infusion of cash and community support in order to continue, and the Hawaiian community seems to face nearly the same litany of woes today as it did 40 years ago.

As the saying goes, one step forward, two steps back.



Protesters were detained by U.S. Marshals and Department of Defense police, under the direction of Assistant U.S. Attorney Bill Eggers.

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About the Author



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Ian Lind is an award-winning investigative reporter and columnist who has been blogging daily for 15 years. He has also worked as a newsletter publisher, public interest advocate and lobbyist for Common Cause in Hawaii, peace educator, and legislative staffer. Lind is a lifelong resident of the islands. [Read his blog here.](#)

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