

Voyage of the Manteño

THE EDUCATION OF A MODERN-DAY EXPEDITIONER

An excerpt of the book by

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A FEW WORDS OF EXPLANATION

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A FEW WORDS OF EXPLANATION

“I am aware that a minimal raft, adrift in a huge sea, would constitute an ideal laboratory, isolated and inescapable, for the study of human behavior. Escape is always possible on an island, desert, or mountain. We can always remove ourselves a little or a lot from the others, from what hurts us or bothers us. [But] not on a raft...”

-Santiago Genoves

The Acali Experiment: Five Men and Six Women on a Raft

Long before the end, I knew that I would tell a story of struggle in the field. I knew that regardless of whatever I might accomplish in the future, I would be obligated someday to write about the struggle that my colleagues and I had undertaken during two, hellish expeditions in the late 1990s. In those years we fought a series of primitive little wars against the only omnipotent forces still remaining on the earth. These were struggles that seemed antiquated, ones that I think many people felt had already been won by the explorer. That was not the case for us. In a century that saw the world of the explorer become a very safe place to live, we lived a life of madness, mutiny, mud, terror, desperation, failure, disease, death, the surreal, and the sublime. We fought and fought in those years, struggling in our primitive way, until our muscles all but gave out, and ultimately, we were left as survivors on a foreign shore.

In 1995, when I launched my first balsa raft, I believed that I could maneuver around the natural forces of the earth, or at least control my destiny as I endured them. After all, the popular books about voyaging by balsa raft had told of hopeful, optimistic voyages; indeed, they had all been heart-warming stories. But by the time I had built my third balsa raft, in late 1998, my outlook had changed. As I prepared to go to sea once more I fully expected to wander on the Pacific Ocean for months. By that time I wouldn't have ventured the slightest guess at what might happen to me, or my vessel, in the end. When someone asked where we might end up, I said, “Panama, Japan, Hawaii, or clinging to the side of a container ship, watching our vessel go down. I honestly have no idea.”

What had happened to us was nothing like what the world had come to expect from a balsa raft expedition, and I worried for years that people back home wouldn't understand. The few times I have tried to explain to my friends the bizarre behavior that occurred on my first voyage, or the heroics that saved my life on my second, those same friends have

turned ashen, and then silent. I feel very uncomfortable talking openly about some of these things and I knew long before the end—while I was still out in the field, that unless I wrote about it, people would never really understand what had happened to us out there. More than anything, I wanted people to know and perhaps even to *feel* what it would be like to be on an uncertain expedition.

My story gnawed at me for years, but as I began to write I began to see that I must also tell the story of a culture of mariners. Unless I told their story—unless I explained their history—then my own would seem fruitless. The people I speak of are those of the southern coast of Ecuador. They are descended from the ancient *Manteño* culture. These people were not obscure acquaintances to me; I ate at their table, watched them raise their children, went to sea with them, and feel closer to them in some ways than to people in my own land.

I went to their country for the first time in the early 1990's. I had been told by many in Ecuador that if I had any interest in building balsa rafts I should go to the fishing village of Salango: This was the seat of the ancient Manteño culture.

One evening at dusk, as the brown countryside turned gray and sharply cooler, I climbed on the back of a truck headed for Salango. Around me stood a group of young fishermen wearing black woolen jackets and caps. Most were in their 20s and were small and lean. They of course asked me why I was going to a little town like Salango and so I pulled an old book out of my briefcase and showed them pictures of balsa rafts, and then explained my plans to them. One man leaned forward, put his finger on a picture of a balsa raft in the book, and said: "I can do this." His name was Dower Medina, and he would become my friend and voyaging companion throughout those momentous years. The other fishermen around him nodded in agreement with what he had said. They kept pointing at him and repeating the same phrase, over and over again: "*El es marinero. El es marinero.*" They seemed so proud to be able to say such a simple thing about him: "*He is a mariner.*"

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THE WORST DAY ...AND THE BEST

There were thousands of people massed around the raft and thousands more spread out on the beach in a mile-wide area. As far as could be seen, even on the hillsides, the Ecuadorians were standing in the hot sun, waiting, focusing all of their attention on the primitive vessel at the center of their own mass. Those who were nearby could reach out and touch it, but for those farther away, the raft seemed somewhat like an old fashioned ship-in-a-bottle—wooden and ancient and on display. It sat on top of wooden roller logs that were supposed to work like stone-aged wheels, and I was trying to push it into the ocean and it wouldn't go. For me, and now for the Ecuadorians, a sickening drama was unfolding, a fiasco, a spectacular failure, and spreading through the mass of people in wave after descending wave was a heartbreaking disappointment, a palpable disillusionment. I could see it in their faces, and I could see from where I stood atop the mast, looking out over them, that every single heartbroken Ecuadorian face in that mass of humanity—every single one—was looking at *me*.

Only a few days earlier the national paper had covered its front page with an enormous color photo of the raft and had announced that we would launch it on Sunday, the 19th of March, 1995. Along with all the other attention it had set off a vast migration to the tiny coastal town of Salango. For three days they had been pouring in from every corner of Ecuador, coming in from towns nobody around here had ever even heard of. There was no place to put them and so they had been sleeping on the beaches and in people's houses. It was incredible. Above all things Salango had always been *disconnected*, a small town at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, a tiny cluster of houses surrounded on three sides by hills and wilderness with but a single desolate road leading to it, and now the entire nation, from the people on the beach to the television audiences behind all of those cameras, had converged on it. But the raft lay there like a farce, worthless; it wouldn't budge.

And there were the Ecuadorians—just standing there in the sun, staring at the debacle, being incinerated. The Equator was right down the road and the sun was right overhead, and a purple outline, a malignant ultra-violet gleam of radiation, hung on everything. The sand of the beach blazed so hot with radiation that no one, native or outsider, could cross it barefooted. Standing for hour after hour in the sun was like a moral demonstration for the Ecuadorians because for them staying in the shade was a way of life. It was not uncommon to drive down a road anywhere in the country and see them waiting at midday for a bus, standing against a wall, lined up in a row with their backs against the bricks as though facing a firing squad—hiding under the wall's tiny shadow—flattening their bodies into a thin slice of precious shade. These thousands were now standing out in the open, braving the Equatorial sun, the malignant purple intensity, *El Sol*—the most unnatural, detestable thing any Ecuadorian could do—because of the raft, because of a tiny hope for a little good feeling. They were an 8000-year-old culture but they felt they had nothing great to show for it: no Pyramids, no Coliseum, no Great Wall. They once had the balsa raft, their great maritime achievement, but all of them were gone now, never to be seen again. The once-great Manteño mariners who sailed those rafts had disappeared too, either into the sand or into the Pacific Ocean. They as a people possessed a national feeling of being forgotten, of being an unknown country. But the raft in the center of their own mass had alleviated a little of that unsettling feeling and had replaced it with a little pride. But pride is a small idea. In truth, they had brought with them to the beach nationalism, patriotism, heroism, history, tradition, their cultural dignity, their personal dignity, their legends, stories they had heard when they were children, stories that they had then told to *their* children, and grandchildren—all of it: brotherhood, dreams, sentimentality, hope—*everything*—all concentrated into a singular aching desire to feel good about Ecuador.

And I had broken it all. Their great ship, which I had come from nowhere to build, would not move. It was as though there was something intrinsically wrong with it. This ingenious technology that symbolized them, their mariners, their legendary *marineros*, wasn't good enough, and though many had come together to build it, I was now the symbol of a faint suggestion that *their* ancient culture wasn't as good as some other nation's. For hour after hour I had been trying to push it heroically into the ocean and it

had been a grotesque demonstration of impotence. At the front of the raft, where it pointed out toward the approaching surf, we had tied a long rope to a crossbeam and had then extended it out into the water. This was our first hauling line, and with a little encouragement volunteers had lined up on the rope, prepared to pull. Then we attached another hauling line to the raft and then another and then people from the crowd seemed to realize the immensity of pulling the giant raft into the sea and began volunteering their own ropes. Soon, approximately one hundred people were lined up in front of the raft, manning six independent lines. People stood on all sides of the vessel too, pushing against it with all of their might for hours, but the raft hadn't budged an inch. And I had been the center of it all. I had waddled back and forth in the loose sand, obviously wrong in every way, perplexed, peering at the lines and the pushers, wondering what the hell could be the matter, kicking and slinging sand everywhere, sunburned, with sand hanging off me in patches ...and watching this man flounder, *me*, only made it more sickening for the Ecuadorians. More and more they stared at me, slowly losing confidence. Faces turned blank. The sun glared down on my nose and ears and I was obviously in the wrong place, obviously foreign, and oversized, and dumb, and more and more the Ecuadorians seemed to be looking around aimlessly, as though wanting to turn away, as though wanting some kind of relief from the slow torturous death of so much hope.

Of course it wouldn't move—it was a behemoth! That word—'*raft*'—must have been the most misleading word I had ever spoken. A raft was something a child played with—this was a vessel that could transport thousands of pounds of cargo across the *open sea*. When the logs for the base of the raft had been delivered to the beach two months before, they had lain in an ungainly mass like an entire pod of beached whales—55,000 pounds of dead weight. I had seen them felled at the government's experimental forest and I had seen them brought in on flatbed trucks and all the while I had thought them monsters, impossible to cope with. But for two months afterward we had toiled in the purple radiation to build the giant raft, isolated from the modern world and immersed in the age of woods and timbers, and in that age all things were massive and heavy, blunt and bulky, thick and cumbersome. Simply moving and adjusting the immense building blocks of that era was one of its greatest hazards. Whenever we moved something, anything, we moved it inch by inch. We had never used anything that could be

considered a “precision tool” –we had been like cavemen, constantly clubbing or beating or chopping or hacking at something. The blunt instrument was the tool of necessity, and if we were going to move the behemoth across the scalding beach we would have to do it with the greatest blunt instrument ever developed: the *wanca*.

In the strictest sense, there’s no such word – *wanca*. The real word is *palanca*, or simply “lever,” but for some reason Enrique Guillen, our resident genius of primitive technology, had shortened it to just “*wanca*.” When Enrique spoke of a *wanca* he meant a hardwood pole eight inches thick and ten feet long, with one end carved thin and flat so that it looked like a gigantic screwdriver head. This was his lifting machine—the primitive equivalent of a forklift, and a group of seven people could easily lift a medium-sized automobile, or 3000 pounds, with this type of *wanca*. Enrique was now at the back of the raft, directing the townspeople, the *Salanguenños*, to bring in *wanca* after *wanca*. Enrique had curly white hair and skin like brown leather, and I could see from my high vantage point that he was rubbing his left forearm, slowly running his hand up and down, lost in deep thought. Enrique always thought with his forearm: When he was problem solving he’d rub his right forearm very slowly. When he wanted to illustrate a point he was trying to make he’d twist and turn and contort his forearm to represent how he was going to manipulate this log or that log, or rope, or bamboo cane. When something was wrong he’d shake both forearms in front of his body. He’d hold the palms of his hands out in front of him and wag those meaty forearms of his, saying: “No, that won’t work—it’ll *break*.” I had come to see that all things in his universe were strong: design, lumber, rigging. Strength was the root of every discussion and strength of construction was the basis for every decision he made. In building the raft he had taught me what breaks on the ocean and what does not. I could see the small stout man now, wearing as always a paint smeared t-shirt over his massive torso and wedging enormous levers—ten-foot *wancas*—under the stern of the raft.

Up on the coastal road, the only road to Salango, trucks and busses were arriving all the time, coming in from all over the country and disembarking people of all types. I could see them walking and running. They as a people could be best described as clean cut; their fashion, as it had always been since time immemorial, was well-groomed, with shirt tails usually tucked in and even when in short pants and sandals—which was rare—

never disheveled. They could also be described as a highly literate people: though their country was poor most had been to high school and all but a very few could read and write well. On the beach were students and teachers, working-class fishermen from every village up and down the coast, groups of teenage girls holding hands and urbanites in hard-soled shoes from the capital city in the distant Andes. Entire families had come. I could see children in brightly colored clothes running toward the raft in excitement, with their parents and grandparents trotting behind. Audio and video teams from every radio and television station and journalists from every newspaper in the country and many from other parts of South America had surrounded the raft at dawn, and were now competing for the best shot possible. An Army Reserve unit had arrived, marching, singing patriotic songs, and waving the Ecuadorian flag. These thousands of clean cut and modest people were simply standing, staring blankly at a gigantic symbol of their history.

For a craft made of round logs and poles, the raft was decidedly straight and flat. Everything had been cut so carefully that the vessel's geometry was one of right angles and flat surfaces. Its massive logs, which had once been crooked and ill fitting, were now a single unit, a 44-foot long rectangle of beige wood that came to a point at the front, just like a conventional ship. Its deck, made up of scores of tan bamboo canes, was a rectangular platform with squared corners. The little bamboo hut at the back of the deck, where we would live while at sea, was essentially a square house, tan and beige, with square windows and a square door.

But it was more, something more than just physical. Several people had talked openly about the fact that upon seeing it for the first time you experienced a very peculiar feeling: There was something about the giant raft that *moved you* for a moment. It caused a strange reaction in you, a transformation: It wiped your mind clean for a moment and immersed you in the fascination of the old days; it sucked you in like a perfect movie when every detail of the wear and the tear and the dirt was exactly as it should be. It didn't look at all like something built by people of the modern era; it looked like something that had been found in a cave. Its little house of bamboo poles, especially, with its perfectly square dimensions and slightly undersized windows and door, gave the raft a dream-like quality, an other-worldliness. Standing next to it, looking out to sea, you saw nothing of the last five hundred years of civilization—you saw Salango in 1500 AD, the

day of the ancient Manteño. Even to us, we who had built it, the giant raft sometimes seemed as though it was a foreign object, not a vessel that we ourselves had made but something that a team of archaeologists had discovered in a hermetically sealed tomb and had brought to the surface, completely intact. But it was *real*, as improbable and as surreal and as frankly weird as that may seem, and big too, and solid. You could touch it and you could slap it. You could walk up to this improbable thing on the sand, this ancient ship from another world, and you could slap the heavy logs with your palms and you could feel a deep thud, and you could grip the raspy ropes in your hands and run them down and feel your skin burning on the hairy fibers. This primitive ship, our creation, this thing that we had built and that was now bigger than us, didn't even show a *sign of moving*—not even the *potential*—to be moved.

We had started at dawn, and for five hours people had pushed and pulled and strained in the purple radiation and the burning sand and the raft had remained completely still ...not an inch—not a millimeter. Worse, we had to get it into the water on that particular day. We had scheduled the launch of the raft so that it occurred on the day of the highest tide of that month. At roughly three o'clock in the afternoon the tide would crest, the ocean would come as close to the raft as possible, and we would have to move the behemoth perhaps as much as seventy-five feet to reach it. If we couldn't push the monster that far before then the ocean would recede away and not rise to that point again for weeks. Again we tried budging it. Nothing. We tried it over and over again. Nothing! The crowd stood by in the brutal sun, staring at me and the raft, and it was at that sickening moment, after hours of failure, that Enrique worked his way through the crowd, plodding in the sand until he finally reached me, and said, into my ear: "You've got to get up on the mast. Understand? Get everyone perfectly coordinated, and then command them to *push*."

"Yeah—but I'm a gringo, ya know? Will they accept my comman—?"

"—Yes," he said over his shoulder, walking away, and then disappeared into the crowd to return to the *wancas*.

So I pulled myself up on the bamboo canes of the deck, walked to the rope ladder hanging from the top of the mast, and then climbed up. The mast was made from two long poles, lashed to a point, with a crossbeam lashed in the middle so that it formed a

perfect A, thirty feet tall ...and that's where I stood now, in the center of the A: naked before them, with their soulful stares, and their dignity, and their disillusionment. I wore a t-shirt and shorts but I was living the universal nightmare of being outdoors and realizing that you are naked, everything is showing, and you just want to cover up—you just want to take it all back. This was an accident! Lord! Nothing had prepared me for this! Yes, I had always been an adventurer, going back to the grass-roots days of modern adventure in the 1970's. I had solo-canoed white water at the age of twelve, made my first parachute jump at fifteen, dove on shipwrecks at sixteen, and climbed office towers at seventeen. Yes, I had done all of those things, and when I had done them it had been the most natural thing in the world. And because of that it had always seemed natural that someday I would move up to expeditions. Wasn't that where adventurers go *after* all of that other stuff? Wasn't it simply a logical progression?: You train your whole life by being an adventurer, and then you graduate to 'The Big Expedition.' Right? Why not? I was frequently nervous and uncomfortable around people or in social situations, but when I rappelled off the wall of a skyscraper in the middle of the night, I felt just fine. So I had come to Salango—come to build a balsa raft— because it was the next sensible step in my life...

But this was different. My God! I had simply read a book! I had read an old book about balsa rafts and had decided to build one and sail it to The Hawaiian Islands, 5000 nautical miles from Ecuador. I was 29 at the time, unmarried, and had a little money in the bank. I had known fully that if I chose to go on expedition I would be taking a vow of poverty: what money I had would be just enough to get the giant raft into the water. I knew that regardless of wherever I ended up or whatever happened to me, I would emerge penniless. And yet there were no second thoughts or lingering doubts. I had never made a long voyage on the ocean but I knew how to sail and I had experience in lashing timbers, and so the day after turning the last page of that book about rafts I had driven to the hardware store and had bought a small balsawood airplane. What else could I do?: It was the only time I had ever seen balsawood! I had then called the company that made the tiny model, had begun talking to their engineers, and had gotten connected somehow to Henri Kohn, son of the "Balsa King of Ecuador." "I've been waiting for this all my life," he had said. "I've got a model of a balsa raft sitting in my office. Can you meet me

in Ecuador in two weeks?” Two weeks later I met Henri and made arrangements to buy balsa logs. I would come to find out that the reason balsawood was so expensive in North America was because it was the product of a long chain of cultivation, processing, transportation, taxation, what have you—*my* wood, on the other hand, would be subjected to none of this. I would be using ordinary logs, which would come from the Ecuadorian forestry service. My 25 tons of balsawood would cost around \$130.00. That was it. One phone call. One tiny airplane. \$130.00. And now I stood three stories above a sea of heads and faces with my bare feet heavy and bony on a hardwood pole and Ecuador looking at me—and it was there that I suddenly realized that I was an obscure man, a nobody, a naïve adventurer who eighteen months before had bought a toy airplane in a far away country. I had known nothing of these people; I had never seen their faces nor heard their voices. I had known nothing of their country, nothing of the Manteño, and nothing of balsawood. That tiny airplane, sealed in its flimsy plastic bag and costing \$1.59, had been all that I knew. And in that moment of freak realization before thousands of Ecuadorians my mind seemed to blink, as though the scope of what lay before me overloaded my brain, as though the utter improbability of standing where I now stood overwhelmed every feeling that I had ever felt up to that moment. And in the next moment, I drew in the deepest breath I could and shouted: “ONE! TWO! THREE! PULLLLLLLLLL!!!!”

They roared like an attacking army, releasing a ferocious determination—not a *cheer*—this wasn’t a happy afternoon at the ballgame—it was something pent up—a roar so deep and so massive that it seemed to roll across the beach, wash over the giant raft, and then surge out into the sea: “HAAAAAUUUUGGGGHHHHH!!!!” –and the raft inched forward!

READY?! ONE! TWO! THREE! PULLLLL!!!!” —and it came again—a bawling noise, like a great charging mass of club wielding medieval soldiers—
 “HAAAAAUUUUGGGGHHHHH!!!!” – and the raft surged forward an entire foot!
 “READY?! ONE! TWO! THREE! PULLLLL!!!!” –and you could see the muscles in the backs and shoulders of hundreds of human beings suddenly burst up from the skin and flex like the fibers of a gigantic arm and-“HAAAAAUUUUGGGGHH!!!!”

I was calling out to them and they were answering; they were driving the giant raft into the sea, pushing it with their shoulders and with their arms, driving it toward the exploding surf and getting stronger and stronger with each push.

“ONE! TWO! THREE! PULLLLL!!!!”

“HAAAAUUUUUUUUUGGGHH!!!!” –another surge forward!

“ONE! TWO! THREE! PULLLLL!!!!”

“HAAAAUUUUUUUUUGGGHH!!!!”

Masses of people were surging in on the raft now, cheering and creating a compression of humanity. I saw faces smiling and glowing. I saw women laughing and crying and applauding—all at the same time. I saw an old man, perhaps a grandfather or an uncle, take a small boy by the shoulders and face him toward the raft. The old man pointed proudly at the raft: ‘This is part of your culture, and you may never see anything like it again.’ I saw an elderly woman, fragile and skeletal and wearing faded blue dress, amble out in front of the raft and put her bony hands on one of the hauling lines. She stood out in the surf, with seawater washing up and swirling around her legs—tugging as best as her little body could—smiling and crying long streams of tears.

Waves were coming in all the time and exploding around the pullers in front of the raft. It was one of those afternoons in Salango when the noise and calamity of the breakers couldn’t be ignored. Even those who had lived there for fifty years would stop for a moment on a day like this to listen to the long explosions that rolled through the town like distant thunder. Those sounds had been heard in every house in Salango everyday for the past 8000 years. In this region of black volcanic rock and scratchy scrub brush only the Pacific Ocean was fertile, and in this place they were *people of the sea*. Their culture had grown up on this beach, a two mile-stretch of sand that carved a tan-colored C against the sparkling turquoise water of the bay, and for eighty centuries they had listened to the waves curl over and shatter here. In ancient times they had held religious ceremonies on *Isla de Salango*, the only island in the bay, a massive monolith of stone and scrub that towered 400-feet from the surface, and though they didn’t leave behind a written history of their own they had left behind a legacy, recorded mostly by the Spanish Conquistadors—as though they were something to behold, something remarkable, something completely unique in Ancient America: a culture of mariners who

had built a vast shipping empire using their giant rafts and their unmatched seamanship. The Conquistadors had sailed into these waters for the first time in 1526, complete outsiders, like space explorers landing on a new planet, and though they were mariners themselves they had encountered something that had left them a little dumbfounded: A gigantic raft, sailing on the sea, with ropes and sails “as fine as anything in Spain,” and crewed by a people that the Conquistadors called “great mariners.” That raft had come from Salango, and they—those great mariners, were the Manteño. Now on a March afternoon in 1995, amidst their sand and their turquoise waters and their towering island, it was as though *they* had come back from the dead.

The scene on the beach now was something that bent the mind. The gigantic raft was clearly walking across the beach, but by tiny bits. Volunteers were coming in to relieve those who could push the raft no longer and runners were being sent to houses for water. More lines were being attached to the front of the raft and more *wancas* were being brought in behind. I could hear passionate calls of encouragement coming from all parts of the enormous crowd. Yelling to them, I asked: “Are you ready?!”

“Yes John,” they shouted, “Let’s go! Let’s GOOOO!!!!”

PULLLLL!!!!”

“HAAAUUUUUUUGGGHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

“MORE!!!”

“HAAAGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

“MORE!!!”

“HAAAGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

The progress was slow, very slow, but sure, and so we worked like this with the *wancas*, churning and staggering across the burning sand. Half an hour passed, then an hour, and they were still driving. I was enormously relieved that the raft had at last moved, but the sun was beating down and we still had a long way to go.

Though I had been in the field for almost three months, and though I had learned much through the teachings of Enrique, I had awakened that morning wondering if launching the primitive ship into the ocean might be beyond my abilities. As I had walked out on the beach that morning I had noticed that the wear of The Expedition was already showing on my brother, Brock. We had been running our operations out of a hut,

a *cabaña* really, a two-roomed bamboo box on short stilts, and for the past eight weeks the remarkable Enrique had led us up the dangerous learning curve of primitive technology and shipbuilding. In that time the radiation had been especially cruel to Brock. He was a slim man, blond, with a bushy yellow beard that the sun had bleached white. At 36, he was five years older than me. He too had been raised on the religion of adventure and I had a lot of faith in his durability. Brock had been the first to join The Expedition and then afterward I had begun the long process of recruiting people to sail on a balsa raft, and it had been a hair-raising experience: Most people had no idea of what they were up against. One gentleman I interviewed had said, quite sincerely: "I just don't think it will be stimulating enough for me." Another had asked: "My main question is: Will I be able to bring my skateboard?" I later saw these experiences as humorous, but at the time they shocked me. I knew my life was at risk the moment I decided to go on expedition, but over the next seven years I met only a tiny handful of people who really understood the level of danger involved. Dower Medina, the greatest mariner I would ever know and a Salangueno, joined shortly after Brock, and then a third came along, an Ecuadorian Doctor named Eduardo. I met him during one of my many reconnaissance trips leading up to The Expedition. He had an office and a laboratory in a clinic in Esmeraldas, a remote town in the northern jungle. We needed a physician, and Eduardo seemed perfect, but he disqualified himself in the first week by flatly refusing to carry expeditionary equipment. He said that he was above that type of labor. It was all for the better: I found out several years later that he wasn't really a doctor at all; he had just been pretending to be one.

The fourth to join was a charismatic film director named Annie Biggs. From my vantage point on the mast I could see her now, pushing on the balls of her feet in the loose sand around the raft, moving quickly from one place to another, directing the shooting of various cameras. I had met her while looking for advice on shooting a documentary film. She loved the project, sensed its potential, and had volunteered to organize a film. As always she moved with purpose, and below me I could see her fiery auburn hair weaving through the crowd with her cameraman behind her. She was now standing out in front of the raft, in the surf, shooting the lines of pullers on the ropes. The

tide was rising, and some of them were now standing in three feet of water, with sheets of foam climbing up their legs.

At the back of the raft, men staggered and fell after each heave of the *wancas*. They would put five or six shoulders under each giant lever, and, at the signal, would surge forward, driving with the hardened muscles of their legs. When the raft lurched ahead the *wancas* would come undone and the pushers would fall in all directions. Sweat was pouring down their arms and necks and their shirts and pants were soaked. Sand covered every inch of them, hanging in big patches and shedding off their bodies in clumps. Their stomping, pumping feet had dug a pit in the sand behind the raft and Enrique was down in it on his hands and knees, panting, getting up slower and slower every time, but with more and more determination in his face.

This type of work was dangerous, but we had built the raft in this way. For weeks we had awakened at dawn and had trudged half a mile down the beach from our *cabaña* to the worksite, pushing on our feet as the loose sand parted under our weight, and then for hour after hour we had pulled on the lines, straining until our forearms ached, pulling as a group, in unison, sometimes as many five or six of us standing in a column—squeezing one lashing at a time—struggling and grunting against the lonely sounds of an eternal surf and the ‘*tick tick tick tick*’ of the stretching rope—pulling, tightening, re-tightening, and then re-tightening again the thousands of feet of rope until every line, joint, and lashing, was snug. Nothing was ever done by one person. When we moved one of the smaller building blocks of the raft, like a mast pole or a crossbeam, we worked like a mule team. We’d tie small poles crosswise to whatever we wanted to move, so that it had handles protruding out at regular intervals, and then ten men would gather, five to a side, and bend down over the handles and count down to a hoist, “...one, two, three, heave!” and then the beam or pole, cradled precariously in our arms, would creep up to a height of four feet. Down the line you’d see men’s arms and legs quivering under the strain. Now the hard part: To move the crushing timber out to the worksite would require the ten-man team to stagger across the sinking sand. If the men stepped in unison the timber generated a predictable, controllable motion ...on the other hand, if one man in the lurching unit got out-of-sync it wobbled violently and at twenty different angles—like a 900-pound fish that was suddenly alive and fighting furiously. When that started you

could feel the whole unit, men and timber, collapsing. Men's feet would drag and sweep in the loose sand. They'd stagger. They'd twist in ugly contortions or impulsively throw their hands out in front of them and then the unit would crash on the burning beach, crushing the men in a sandy disaster. Invariably someone would writhe around in the searing sand, clutching a leg or an arm or a rib cage. Someone else, usually me, would then have to ask the dreadful questions: Did it break? Can you walk?

But you couldn't lift a balsa log with thirty men or even fifty, and so we had worked with the *wancas*—the big ones—and we knew what they could do. We had put the entire raft, one log at a time, up on blocks—just like putting a backyard project up on sawhorses—using the *wancas*. Typically we'd set up our standard lifting machine, a *wanca* set up on a stump, and then Enrique would stand to one side of the gigantic lever, his palms up, and signal 'wait.' Then he'd wave us down slowly: "Gently, ... gently now," and we'd drape our bodies over the *wanca*, committing all of our combined weight, converting 700 pounds of downward force into 7000 pounds of upward force at the other end of the lever. All of that force would concentrate at the tip of the *wanca*, an area the size of a paperback book, and slowly the balsa log would float up. As soon as the whole precarious mass was suspended, one of Enrique's men, a quiet, intelligent man with a weathered face, named Manuco, would shoot under and wedge in a four-inch slice of wood. Hanging motionless on the giant lever, holding the balsa log in the air with the *wanca*, we'd wait breathlessly for Manuco to get out of there, and then relax as soon as he had the slice in place. This was the way things usually went, but occasionally we'd get one of the logs up in the air and the whole thing would crash. The *wanca* would spring out and jerk upward and bounce off its stump, and then there'd be a split second of panic, of men falling and grunting and jumping out of the way and being dragged down. Many days had passed this way, working on the beach with the *wancas*, slowly raising and adjusting twenty-four tons of timber, and then one afternoon Manuco had gone under a suspended log to set a wedge and the massive timber slipped off its block and stomped down like an elephant foot. The split second before it crushed him I saw him bury his face in the beach, and then the fat log thudded on the mushy sand with a 'whump!' -and he was gone. There was no sign that he had ever existed.

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!"

“Dig! Dig! Dig! Dig! Dig!”

“Huuurrrry!!!!”

We clawed at the sand where his head had been before he disappeared. We dug like frantic dogs, scratching and pulling handfuls of sand until we unearthed his mouth. As soon as he appeared he spit sand and then slowly stretched his mouth open to draw in a shallow breath. He was trapped and couldn't move. Inserting a *wanca* under the log, we draped our bodies over the lever, pried the timber from the ground, and then three men pulled him out, stretching his arm until I thought they might dislocate his shoulder. As soon as they had dragged him out he began to roll around on the sand, groaning.

“What is it? What is it?”

“OHHH ... my leg. God, my leg hurts.”

“Get a truck,” Enrique said. “Take him to the pharmacy in Puerto Lopez.”

In Puerto Lopez, a town on the other side of the hills, there was a pharmacist who acted as a medic on these occasions. He had given me a tetanus shot once, after I had managed to bury a rusty machete in my shin. How much formal medical training he had I do not know, but he was a gentle man who was gifted with a hypodermic needle. We got a truck, loaded Manuco on the back, and they went speeding down the hill. Afterward we stood there staring blankly at each other, asking with only our eyes—because we didn't want to verbalize the horrible question: ‘How did he survive that?’ Incredibly, unbelievably, nothing in Manuco had broken. I went to his cabana that night and compensated him for his trip to the pharmacist, but still, I felt lowered. What was money? My adventure had almost killed him that day. I was thankful that we had been building the raft over soft, loose sand. Concrete pavement might have killed him. He returned to work the following day, limping, and when I asked about the leg he just waved it away, and we went back to work, toiling on the Salango shore.

The sand had saved us that day, but working in it could be real hell, and by now, under the purple radiation, the Ecuadorians had been dragging the monster across the mushy, grainy beach for three hours. The tide was almost completely in and the surf was pounding the pullers on the ropes out in front. A wave would break on top of them and they'd go down like bowling pins in the foam, then struggle back to their feet with the seawater pouring off their clothes. After the first half hour of shouting across the beach

my voice had started to labor and after an hour and a half it was gone. I bawled out the cadence now in a raspy growl and felt my vocal chords tearing like the threadbare cloth of an old bed sheet. Many in the crowd had been with us since dawn and had been frying in the radiation for eight hours, but not a single one had left. The sun scorched them and burned them, sweat poured out of their faces and their happy smiles melted to anguish, but they refused to rest, and inch by painful inch, the raft was creeping toward the water's edge.

Some of those who were pulling were from the outside, but most were the Salanguenos. Over the previous weeks we had melded with these people. Living as we had in our *cabaña*, immersed as we had been in our world of primitive shipbuilding, news from the outside world had rarely reached us. Salango sat quietly at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, isolated, and now in the final years of the 20th Century there was some electricity in the town but no running water, and no telephones. Communication still traveled in the same way it always had: Any piece of important news, like the arrival of our gigantic balsa logs or a near-record catch by one of the town's trawlers, could travel across Salango, moving down the long dirt streets, from mouth to mouth and from cinderblock house to chicken coup to bamboo house, passing through a steady succession of best friends, cousins, in-laws, friends of parents, old friends from school days, sisters, uncles, and friends of uncles, in less than ten minutes. A telephone would indeed come to Salango someday, but for now it was a place where the electronic age had not yet been. Indeed, *nothing* had ever penetrated Salango's oldness. In a modern world, it remained ancient.

Whenever you walked through those dirt streets, down the rows of square cinderblock houses in Salango, you saw bundles of forgotten fishing lines snarled around sun-bleached buoys, boats in various states of construction, use, and decay, and you always saw fishermen, going out to sea or returning from it. Sometimes the townspeople would spread their nets in front of their houses and tend to them all day, studiously sewing and mending them in silence. You got the feeling that if somehow the surf noise stopped then they too would suddenly stop, frozen in mid-motion, until the surf started up again. In this rugged place 'the catch' was still an event, and in Salango, when one of the big wooden trawlers would bring in an unusually large load of fish, the townspeople, from

the kids to the old folks, would gather at the beach to revel in the good news. Here, on the sandy curve where we had built our raft, the sight of a bursting net, of thousands of gray and white fish, would inspire just as much hope and just as much celebration in the Salangueños as it had the first time they had brought in such a catch, thousands of years ago. The smaller fishermen, those who didn't work on one of the trawlers, usually went out to sea in flimsy open boats, fifteen to eighteen feet in length, with outboard motors on their sterns. They'd go out at night and sometimes they ranged as far as thirty miles offshore, which was always a risk. If they ran out of fuel or if the motor died it would take a lot of luck to get back to land. Every year or so one of those open boats would disappear offshore, and in every fishing town near Salango there was someone who could tell a horrific tale of survival, or of loss. Dower Medina worked this way too, spending his nights curled up in the bottom of a small boat, drifting offshore and waiting for the fish. He had joined The Expedition on the first day I met him, the first day I came to Salango, in 1993.

Dower had lived in the sea since he was a little boy of six. In the course of his life he had seen perhaps as many as 3000 days on the ocean, but these were only his days at the surface. When he wasn't aboard a boat he was swimming across the ocean's floor, spearing and collecting thousands of pounds of fish and shellfish, relying on his casual access to the seabed in the same unremarkable way that a city dweller relies on the corner store. Whereas most sailors must insulate themselves from the ocean, Dower had been immersed in cold salty seawater for most of the days of his life. And even when he had come out of the water, even when he had sought refuge on land and had walked to his home, he was never entirely separated from the sea. From his front doorstep he had an enormous view of the great Pacific Ocean, rising up until it formed a horizon, and inside his house he slept to the sounds of the thunderous waves, curling over and exploding on the beach.

When those waves came in and broke now, they flooded the base of our raft with stark white foam. It had been four hours of dragging and churning, and no let up. The toiling Ecuadorians had moved the behemoth fifty feet by this time and it was finally at the edge of the surf. Below me I could see Dower standing on the front of the raft, preparing for launch. At 26, he was a fit man of medium height who possessed the aura

of a ‘nice guy’ from a ‘nice family.’ Relaxed and confident, he had a kind of a spring in his step that always made him appear cheerful. Everybody liked him and most of the women I knew loved him. A friend of mine once wrote in his diary, upon seeing Dower walking through the dirt streets of Salango, smiling at people and waving to all of his friends, that he was like a “bronzed man.” Standing on the deck of the raft in a t-shirt and shorts, with his hat on backwards, I could see him signaling to a couple of the big wooden trawlers out in the bay, one bright blue and the other bright yellow, motioning them with his hands and arms to prepare for a tow. We would launch the raft from here—we would set up for one grand push and if the raft broke free from the hold of the sand the trawlers would go to full steam and pull the raft through the surf. Dower tied two ropes to the front of the raft and then gave them to two men, who swam through the surf and then handed them to the sailors standing on the sterns of the trawlers. These would be our tow lines, and they now ran from the raft, through the surf, to the boats that would launch us—we were almost there.

On the beach, at side of the raft, a clearing began to grow. A pocket of space opened up as the pushers and well-wishers backed away from where they had been pressed so compactly against hulking balsa logs, and a young woman stepped forward. Her name was Janette, and it had been agreed among us that she would christen our vessel. Behind her stood The Expedition’s cinematographer, Chris Buntambah, 26, a small heavy-set man with brown wavy hair and round eyeglasses. He and Janette were now officially an item. About half way through the construction of the raft a romance had bloomed between them. Lovely and dignified, Janette liked Chris’s mild personality, and for the past eight weeks Chris could be seen shooting various aspects of life in Salango during the day, and strolling through the middle of town in the evenings with Janette, drinking Cokes and holding hands.

Chris knew that he was facing the enormous task of filming in isolation for months, and without any support. Though I had interviewed many cameramen for The Expedition he was the only one that I had met so far who had shown even the slightest inkling of getting on a raft. His shooting experience was limited, and this expedition was the greatest opportunity of his life—if he could do this he’d have the all-important credentials needed to launch a documentary film career.

For the christening, I climbed down from the crossbeam of the mast, and then jumped off the raft and felt my feet plunge into the soft wet sand. The claustrophobia on the ground was intense. The crowd of people seemed like a wall, densely packed and impenetrable. Cameras of all kinds surrounded me like wide open black eyes, peering intently, watching every move I made. Annie gave Janette a heavy green bottle of champagne, and she stood next to the raft holding it in the air, poised like a batsman at the plate of a big game. It was time to name our raft.

In a way, I was closing the first chapter of a strange, dual relationship with a giant. The old book that had brought me here, that book about balsa rafts that had motivated me to come to this beach, was of course none other than *Kon-Tiki*, and that giant was the legendary Thor Heyerdahl. Heyerdahl had written an anthropological paper in the 1930s stating that in ancient times the South Americans could have voyaged to Polynesia, some 4800 nautical miles away, by way of balsa raft. This theory of his was highly controversial and such a fantastic voyage was considered patently impossible. Heyerdahl wasn't a sailor, but he as plucky an adventurer as had ever lived, and in 1947 he set out from Peru on a balsa raft, together with his crew of five, and then managed to survive 101 days of sailing and drifting with the ocean current before crash landing on a tropical island near Tahiti. With his raft demolished by the crash but all of his friends safe, Heyerdahl had trudged up the beach in Polynesia triumphant: He had crossed the Pacific by balsa raft, and as the news got out and millions read his book, *Kon-Tiki*, he became a scientific superman, a confidant to princes and sheiks, a global ambassador of science and goodwill with almost no equal. In his era only the names of Jacques Cousteau or Edmund Hillary carried the same prestige as his.

Back before the start of The Expedition, after I had decided to sail to Hawaii, I had written a letter to the Kon-Tiki Museum in Norway in the hope that Thor Heyerdahl himself would somehow help me in my quest. In my letter I included a request to name my raft after his. Kon-Tiki meant, loosely, "Sun God," and Illa-Tiki meant, loosely, "Fire God." The Museum wrote back saying that hundreds of such projects were proposed each year, and that there was simply too much for the aging Heyerdahl to keep up with, in spite of his incredible vigor. But the news somehow got to him that someone had proposed a voyage to Hawaii, the hardest place to reach from South America, and on the

5th of January, 1994, Thor Heyerdahl faxed me. He had hammered out a letter on an old-fashioned typewriter, and had sent it to me from his island base, near the west coast of Africa: “It is possible to reach the Hawaiian Islands from Ecuador by balsa raft.

PS. I have no objection to you using the name ‘Illa-Tiki’ for your raft.”

Now, on the beach in Salango, I had built my first balsa raft, and it was *Kon-Tiki* and Thor Heyerdahl who had inspired me to do it. But though he was my origin, and though I stood on his shoulders to do what I did, it was always easy for me to separate his expedition from his theory. Scientists throughout the world were bitterly divided over Heyerdahl’s theories but I felt little of their passion—on either side of the argument. Like anyone who read *Kon-Tiki* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I was gripped by a simple certainty that I could handle a raft, and a great journey. Perhaps this puts me in a trivial light, and I had no doubt come to this beach for little more reason than adventure, but because I was so detached, my mind was fertile for education. Later, for almost a decade, Thor Heyerdahl—this giant and his legacy, would confuse and confound me, until finally I evolved.

Janette, small and thin and holding the champagne bottle in the air, paused for a second, waiting for the cameras to move in, then sucked in a lung-full of air and bellowed out: “FOR GOD! FOR OUR FATHERS! FOR OUR COUNTRY! YOU WILL BE CALLED ILLA TIKI! Then she swung like a champion, aiming with precision at one of the hardwood crossbeams, and the heavy green bottle exploded into white foam. It was finally time for the big push.

By now, the tide had crested and was starting to recede. Fatigue was taking over. We had to launch the raft right now; if we didn’t we’d be chasing the receding surf, exhausted and falling behind. I quickly climbed back to the crossbeam of the mast, working hand over hand up the rope ladder, and then stood on the hardwood pole. From my position in the middle of the A frame I looked out over thousands of exhausted, burned Ecuadorians. They radiated out in every direction from the rectangular vessel in the center and sweat and fatigue showed heavily on their faces. I knew that a well-coordinated push would launch the raft, and to steady myself I now leaned back against the mast pole and reached around to hook it with the crook of my arm. Below me, they were preparing again, readying the *wancas* for a hard push. On the other side of the

breaker line, two hundred feet from the raft, the two trawlers throttled their diesels, sending out clouds of black smoke from their stacks. I looked at the Salanguenos, they locked eyes with me, and then I drew in the deepest breath I could and yelled: “LET’S GOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!—”

“—HAAAUUUUUUUUUUUGGGHHHH!!!” —and then hundreds of people near the raft bowed down in unison. Their heads dropped and their shoulders thrust forward in an immense surge of human strength. The raft began to slide. I could see that it wouldn’t stop this time. It accelerated steadily and then broke free and sped down the slope of the beach. Our creation—our *experimental* ship—was going into the ocean for the first time, and just offshore, only a hundred feet ahead of it, an enormous wave was coming in. My heart leapt. *Illa-Tiki* was heading straight for it. We didn’t even know if the raft would float ...maybe we had done something wrong during the construction ...maybe we had overloaded it with supplies ...maybe there was something we *didn’t know*. I felt the dread of watching an inevitable crash—we had launched the raft at the worst moment and there was no way of stopping it—the front tips of the nine logs were already in the water and we were gathering momentum— we were totally committed and moving fast. The raft was racing toward the wave and the wave was rearing up like a ram standing on its hind legs preparing for a massive blow. I felt *Illa-Tiki*’s bow rising up steeply as it climbed the face of the wave. The wall of water grew and grew and I could see the entire raft—all 30,000 pounds of it—slanting upwards. The breaker reached its climactic point. It curled over. Tons of seawater plunged forward. The two forces—raft and breaker—slammed headfirst into each other, and then the ocean exploded. It was as though a boulder had been flung into a bathtub. The impact of the raft seemed to blast a hole in the ocean, shattering the face of the in-coming wave and throwing sheets and geysers of water in every direction and flinging people into the air. *Illa-Tiki* staggered under the concussion and then came to an abrupt halt—stopped cold by the breaker—and then it seemed to disappear under the foam and chaos. For a long moment it appeared as though it had sunk; below me I could see only the roof of the hut surrounded by swirling seawater and white foam and human bodies radiating from the explosion like shock waves. Then the water level around the little bamboo house seemed to drop sharply. The raft was coming up. The bamboo canes of the deck surfaced with thick masses of seawater pouring and

draining off to all sides. *Illa-Tiki* emerged from under the surf with an enormous bounce. The balsa logs shot up through the surface and then sank back down softly. I could see the two trawlers clawing forward like a dog-sled team, straining to drag the bulky wooden barge from the breakers. The towline was taught and they were churning dark black smoke from their stacks. *Illa-Tiki* crossed over the breaker line, plowing water, and then it rolled hard over on its right side. The hulking raft then seemed to bounce back, recover its composure—shedding the masses of water off its back—and then settle upright. Thousands of drops and streams poured off the mast and the hut like the remnants of a monsoon. But the *Illa-Tiki* was floating well now, and obviously at home in the ocean. Pulling away from the beach smoothly and confidently, it began to leave its first wake, a slight trickle, behind its logs.

Illa-Tiki, a balsa raft, tan and sharp, now cruised into the Bay of Salango. Cheers and shouts of joy from the beach filled the air. “This is the greatest day in the history of Salango,” Enrique told me later. “People will always study the ancients—they’ll look at things in The Museum and so on—but they will always remember today. No one will ever forget what happened here today.”