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## The secret Hawaii mission that led to an extraordinary change

By taking on the military, the Kahoolawe Nine ignited a movement



A group of the Kahoolawe Nine being escorted off Kahoolawe by the Coast Guard. In the foreground are Ian Lind and Steve Morse. In the background is Gail Kawaipuna Prejean, the then-director of the Hawaiian Coalition of Native Claims.

Ian Lind

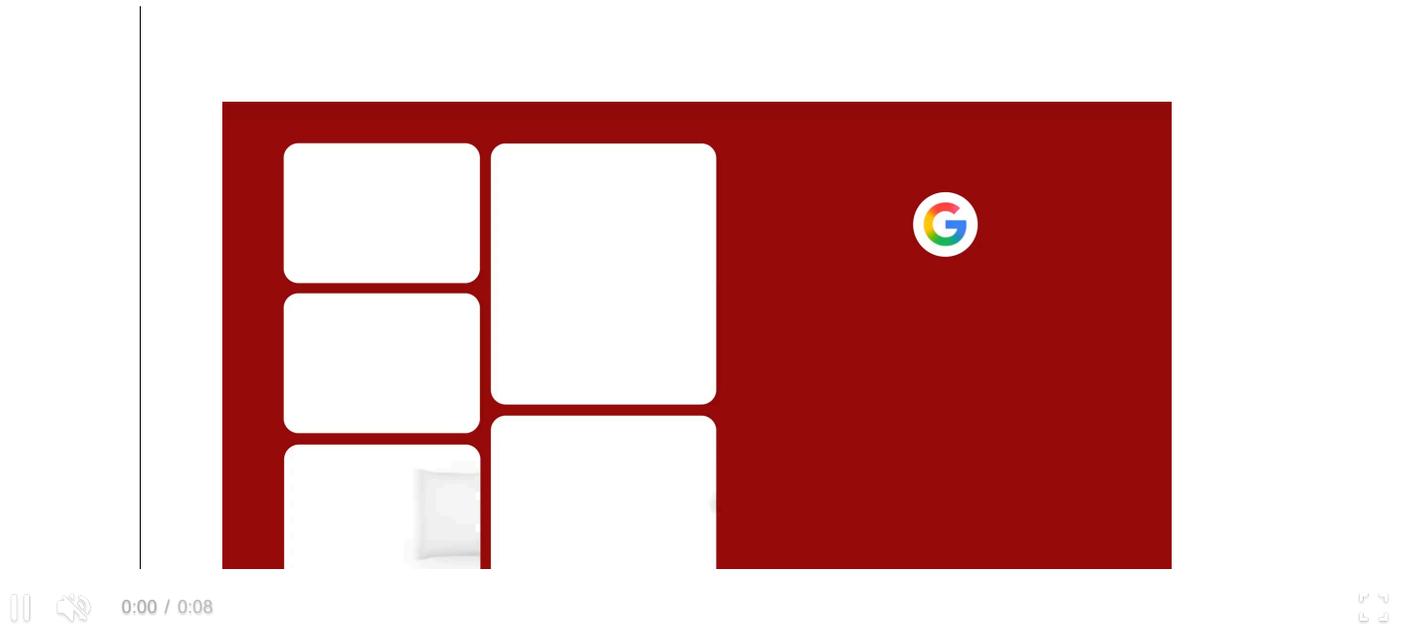
By **Christine Hitt**, *Hawaii Contributing Editor*

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 Listen Now: The secret Hawaii mission that led to an extraordinary change The : 1x  
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Nearly 50 years ago, in the dim light of morning on Jan. 4, 1976, dozens of people gathered secretly at Maalaea Harbor on Maui's south shore and slipped onto several boats bound for Kahoolawe. Most of them were Native Hawaiian. Their intention? To land on the U.S. military-controlled island, which for decades had been used as a bombing target.



Halfway across the channel, a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter hovering above intercepted the flotilla. Over a bullhorn, the Coast Guard warned that the activists must turn around or be arrested and their boats seized.

Most boats complied, but one continued on. Those activists who wanted to keep going scrambled aboard, bringing the total to nine: Walter Ritte, Emmett Aluli, Ellen Miles, Karla Villalba, Steve Morse, Kimo Aluli, George Helm, Gail Kawaipuna Prejean and Ian Lind.

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The fearless group, later dubbed the "Kahoolawe Nine," landed on the island successfully.



Charlie Maxwell, in the hat with his back to the camera, facing a second boat with Karla Villalba, Steve Morse, Ellen Miles and Walter Ritte.  
Ian Lind



Charlie Maxwell, in the hat facing the camera, discusses whether to proceed to Kahoolawe after receiving a warning from the Coast Guard. Gail Kawaipuna Prejean is in the foreground.  
Ian Lind

“There was no plan,” [Ian Lind](#), one of the Kahoolawe Nine, told SFGATE. He was 28 years old at the time, working for the peace and social justice organization American Friends Service Committee. “We thought we’d just stay until we could get some media attention. Eventually, we broke out some food and ate while we watched the Coast Guard boats coming into shore,” Lind said.

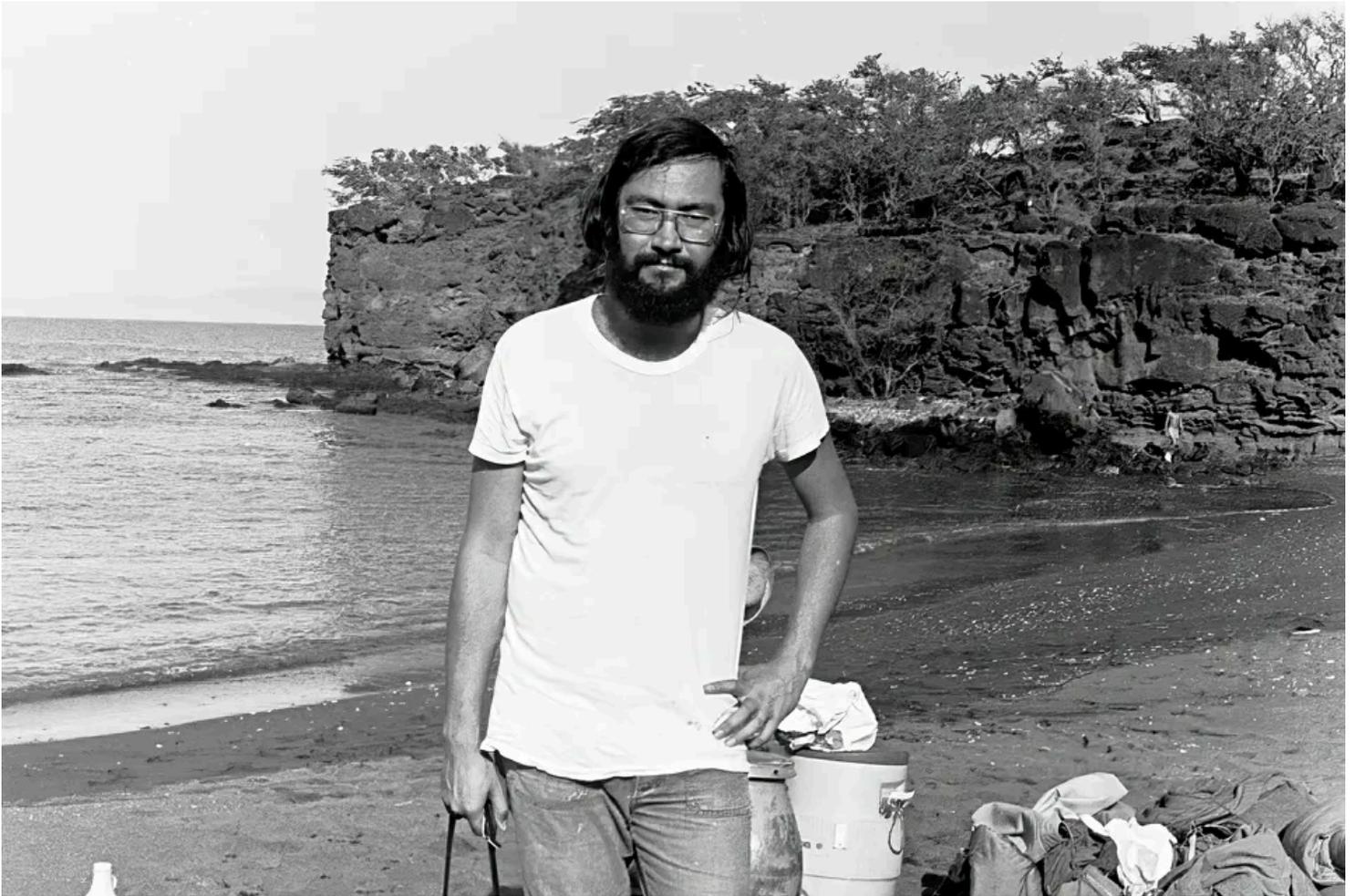


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The group had joined together to raise awareness on Hawaiian issues, from land and fishing rights to trail access and more, during the [American Bicentennial](#), a celebration commemorating 200 years of the United States, hoping the timing would draw more attention.

“But the idea of landing on Kahoolawe and stopping the bombing at least for some period of time, everyone accepted as, you know, that’s a great thing to get attention, and maybe all of our issues can get attention too,” Lind said.



Ian Lind on the beach, soon after landing on Kahoolawe.  
Ian Lind



Assistant U.S. Attorney William "Bill" Eggers, in shorts with back to camera. Ellen Miles is sitting on sand with her back to the camera.

Ian Lind

In the afternoon, a Coast Guard cutter appeared offshore, Lind continued, and small boats came in with an assistant U.S. attorney and a team of federal marshals. "Basically, they took everybody's names and told us we were all going to be removed," he said.

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By that time, though, two of them, Walter Ritte and Emmett Aluli, had disappeared into the mountain above the beach, Lind said. While everyone else was taken back to Maui, Ritte and Aluli eluded capture, staying two nights.

They were picked up on the third day.

By taking on the military, the Kahoolawe Nine ignited a movement, drawing attention to the island's desecration and to Native Hawaiians' rights. That first landing eventually led to the formation of Protect Kahoolawe Ohana, legal action against the U.S. Navy and subsequent landings, keeping the issue in the public eye.

Returning to the island "is the only way I know how to stop the bombing," Ritte told the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in a Jan. 13, 1976, article. "My only hope is that somebody high enough will act to stop the bombing that has been going on all these years," Ritte said. "After personally seeing the terrible devastation and desecration caused by the bombing, I have committed myself deeply to see that it is ended."



Walter Ritte pulls the boat onto the Kahoolawe beach as Karla Villalba watches.  
Ian Lind

## Becoming 'The Target Island'

The U.S. military formally began using a portion of Kahoolawe as a weapons range in 1941, just seven months prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. But when that happened, martial law was declared and the military took over the entire island, removing any residents and shutting down the ranching operation that was there.

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After the war, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed an executive order that permanently allowed the Navy's use of Kahoolawe to continue. In 1959, Hawaii became a state. The order remained, so the island went on to be used for military training during the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Only about 7 miles across the Alalakeiki channel to Kihei, Maui, the neighboring islands had long witnessed the violence inflicted on Kahoolawe. They could feel the shock waves. Maui residents complained about the sound of the explosions, rattling windows and shaking doors. In some cases, the ground shook so hard that residents feared it was Haleakala volcano about to erupt.



A TNT detonation on Kahoolawe Island during Operation Sailor Hat.  
Naval Historical Center via Wikimedia Commons

In Hawaiian folklore, the demigod Maui had raised the island out of the sea. The revered island of Kahoolawe — traditionally named after the Hawaiian god of the ocean, Kanaloa — had been reduced to the nickname “The Target Island.” Eleven miles long and 7 miles wide, it was scarred by decades of military training that included landing exercises, torpedo practice and relentless aerial bombing.

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In some areas, the explosions were so great that they physically altered the island’s landscape.

The most dramatic was in 1965, when the Navy detonated 500 pounds of TNT, simulating a nuclear bomb to test the effect on ships in the water nearby. Black smoke and a massive fireball shot hundreds of feet into the sky over Kahoolawe, followed by a booming shock wave as the smoke turned into a mushroom cloud. The force created a crater measuring 100 feet wide and 15 feet deep.

## The Kahoolawe Movement

As news of the Kahoolawe Nine spread, at least eight additional unauthorized landings on the island followed into the next year. New participants came, as well as returning Kahoolawe Nine activists, including Walter Ritte, Emmett Aluli and George Helm, but the risks were great.

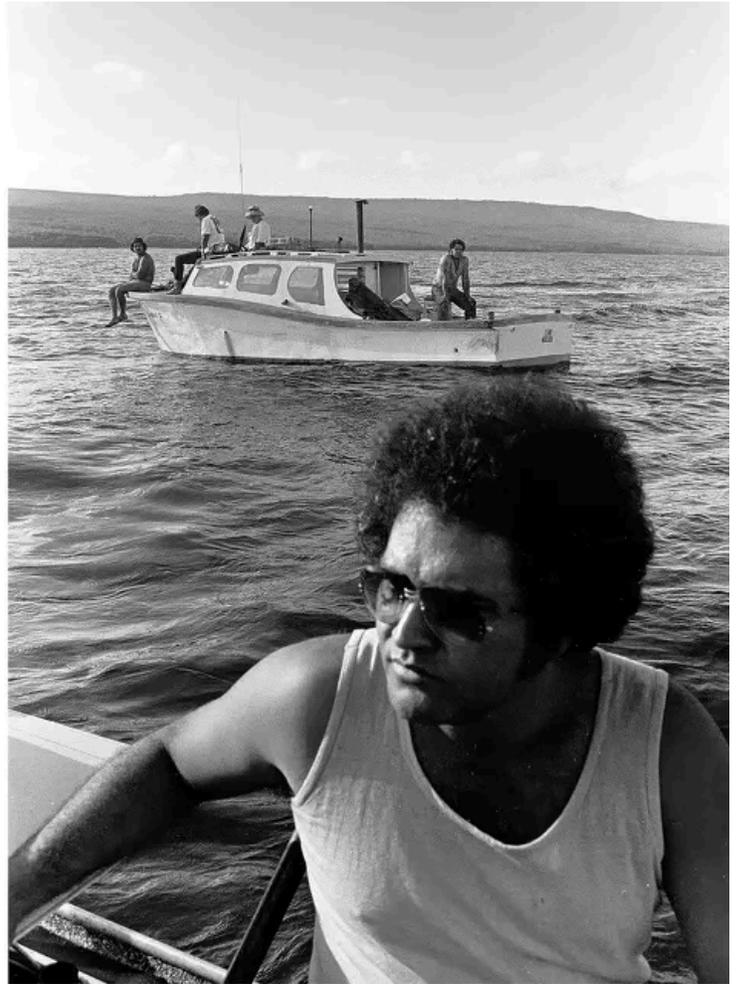
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During one landing in March 1977, tragedy struck when Helm and James Kimo Mitchell were lost at sea. They were last seen clinging to a surfboard in rough seas near Molokini Island, between Kahoolawe and Maui.



On the left: Emmett Aluli, as the small boat carrying the Kahoolawe Nine approached the island. On the right: Gail Kawaipuna Prejean, with Morse, Ritte and Ellen Miles in background.  
Ian Lind

“That’s when the Ohana decided that they would no longer do the illegal occupations because the loss of George Helm and Kimo Mitchell, that the illegal landings were not effective in stopping the bombing and the cost was too great,” Davianna McGregor, a member of the Protect Kahoolawe Ohana, told SFGATE.

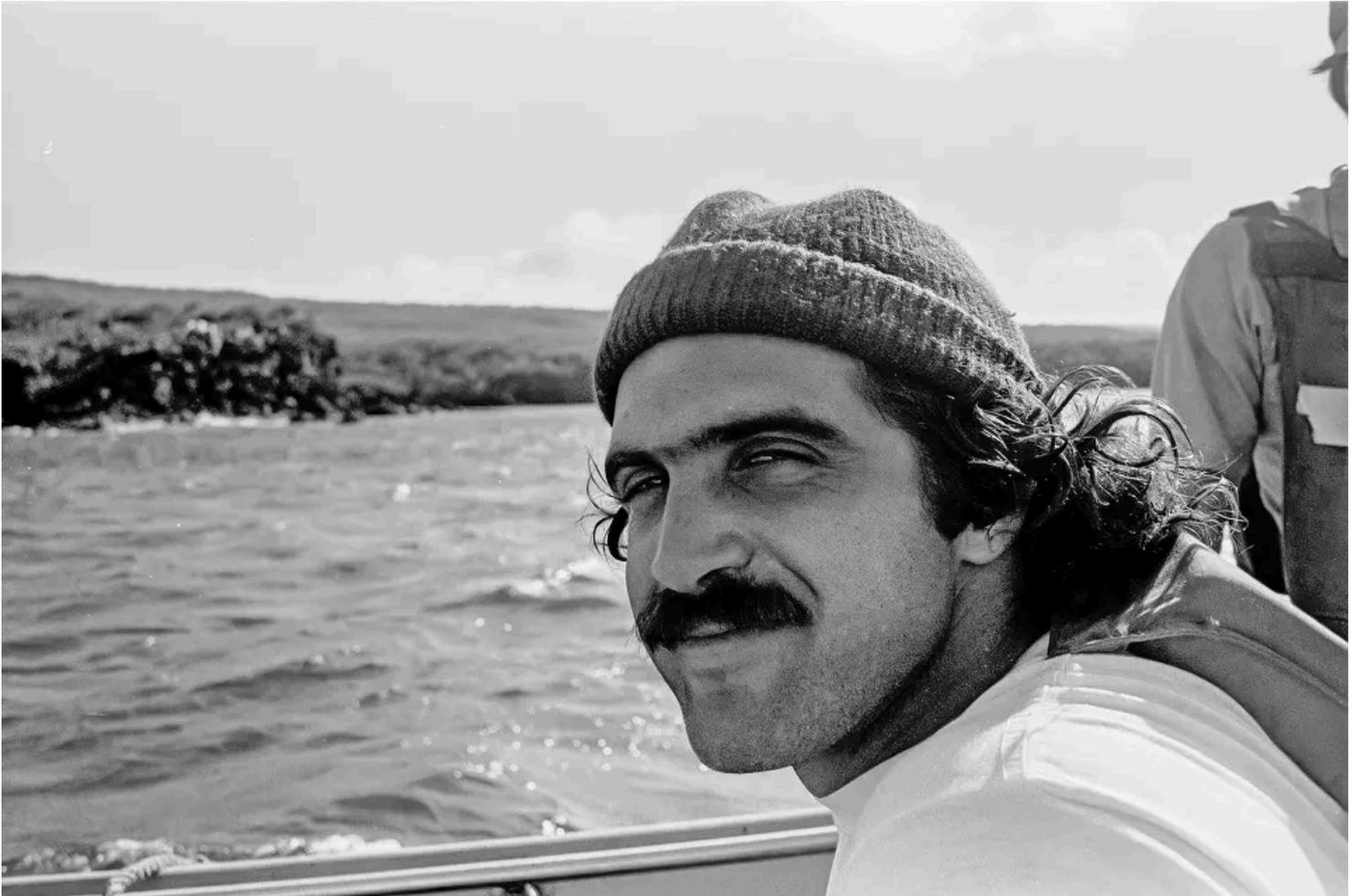
The movement, however, grew stronger. The Ohana filed a federal lawsuit in 1976 against the Navy, bringing environmental, historic preservation and freedom of religion charges to court. The following year, the Navy was ordered to prepare an environmental impact statement, and then in 1980, the Navy was required to provide access to the island.

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After years of legal and political pressure, President George H.W. Bush directed that the military “discontinue use of Kahoolawe as a weapons range” in 1990. Three years later, Congress authorized \$400 million to be put toward ordinance removal, and the island was returned to the state in 1994. The Hawaii State Legislature established the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission to manage the restoration effort, such as reintroducing native plants and monitoring fish populations. Today, the commission welcomes volunteer groups on trips to the island.



Steve Morse, while being transported to the Coast Guard Cutter Mallow.  
Ian Lind



FILE: The coastal view of Kahoolawe from Palaeua Beach.  
Everett Atlas/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Since 2004, Kahoolawe has been cleared of 75% of unexploded ordinance, but the remaining 25% is still considered unsafe.

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“The Kahoolawe movement is really important for reminding our generations of Hawaiians of our responsibility and kuleana to care for our lands and ocean and this practice of aloha aina that was a central way of life of our ancestors,” McGregor said. The Protect Kahoolawe Ohana continues to be involved in stewardship activities, reviving Hawaiian cultural ceremonies and protecting historic sites, as well as ancestral burials.

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Looking back, Lind reflects on the path that led to this point. “It was unbelievable. The credit I have to give to those along the way. That was a long time, right, 20 years in the making,” Lind said.

“The fact that that core group was able to maintain their focus and eventually succeed, I consider it pretty extraordinary,” he said.

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*Editor's note: SFGATE recognizes the importance of diacritical marks in the Hawaiian language. We are unable to use them due to the limitations of our publishing platform.*

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**Christine Hitt**

HAWAII CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Christine Hitt is the Hawaii contributing editor for SFGATE. She is part-Native Hawaiian from the island of Oahu, and a Kamehameha Schools and University of Hawaii graduate. She's the former editor-in-chief of Hawaii and Mana magazines.

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