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Hollywood Stars' Involvement in Aquatics and Water Safety

Stathis Avramidis

The aim of this educational review article was to identify cases of Hollywood stars who have been involved in aquatics. A literature search was conducted using the terms *drowning*, *Hollywood*, *actor*, *rescue*, *aquatics*, *swimming*, and *lifeguard*. It was found that several Hollywood film stars ($n = 33$; males = 20, females = 13) have worked as lifeguards ($n = 12$), performed lifeguard rescues ($n = 2$) or lifesaving rescues ($n = 4$), were aquatics athletes ($n = 6$), or suffered drowning-related incidents ($n = 9$). A brief overview of those actors and their involvement in aquatics is presented.

Participation in aquatics and drowning-related incidents has been the subject of extensive research in numerous studies worldwide. More precisely, it has been shown that participation in aquatic activities has increased steadily over the last decades (Euraire, 1996; Fawcett, 2001; Kester, 1996; Sillitoe & Thorpe, 1986; Smith, 1992). As might be expected, incidents related to drowning often affect healthy people during times of pleasure and leisure (Petridou & Klimentopoulou, 2006) while engaged in aquatic activities (Department of National Heritage, 1993; Lifesaving Society, 2000; Manolios & Mackie, 1988). In the year 2000, 409,272 fatal drownings were reported, making drowning the second leading cause of unintentional injury death globally (this total includes only accidental drowning and submersion; World Health Organization, n.d.).

Despite the plethora of literature evidence on the topic of aquatics and drowning, no published work has reviewed the aquatic sporting activity, water safety, or drowning-related incidents associated with Hollywood film stars or other celebrities. For example, one might wonder whether there have been any Hollywood film stars who have been linked to aquatics, lifesaving, lifeguarding, and drowning-related incidents. Have any Hollywood celebrities ever acted as rescuers, victims, or bystanders during aquatic emergencies? What were the circumstances and the locations of such celebrity-related aquatic emergencies?

Although the personal lives and professional activities of Hollywood film stars and celebrities attract mass media attention, to our knowledge, no one has yet reviewed in any comprehensive way whether celebrities have been involved in any forms of aquatic sports or drowning rescues. This information would be interesting for a number of reasons. First, it may show whether drowning-related incidents

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occurred as a result of similar or different reasons in the lives of Hollywood stars than to the rest of the public, allowing us to compare the circumstances of celebrity aquatic emergencies with those presented in routinely-available epidemiological studies. In addition, it may enable scholars to learn how fatal drownings as a mode of death to a celebrity was perceived by the press or society in different time periods of recent history. Finally, such a review may serve as a useful source of reference for books and research dedicated to the history of aquatics or water safety. The purpose of this article was to see the degree to which some Hollywood film stars and celebrities have been involved in aquatics, either as athletes, professional lifeguards, or amateur lifesavers, and if any have personally been involved in drowning-related incidents.

Literature Search Process

I used the terms *drowning*, *Hollywood*, *actor*, *rescue*, *aquatics*, *swimming*, and *lifeguard* as key words in a literature search that was undertaken to identify Hollywood actors and actresses who may have been involved in aquatics and drowning incidents. The search used several Internet search engines (e.g., Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, The Complete Index to World Film since 1895, Spout.com, and the Internet Movie Database). To obtain the most appropriate literature, articles for selection had to meet two criteria: first, they had to include names of Hollywood actors or actresses and second, those stars had to have worked as lifeguards, to have performed aquatic rescues, to have been aquatic athletes, to have died of drowning, or to have been rescued from drowning by others.

It was revealed that in the literature, there were 33 cases of Hollywood film stars (20 males, 13 females) meeting the selection criteria and these are classified into five categories: Hollywood film stars who worked as lifeguards ($n = 12$), Hollywood film stars who performed lifeguard rescues ($n = 2$), Hollywood film stars who acted as lifesavers ($n = 4$), Hollywood film stars who were aquatic athletes ($n = 6$), and Hollywood film stars who experienced drowning-related incidents ($n = 9$). If a star was mentioned in two of the five categories (see Table 1), for example as a lifesaver and as a swimmer (e.g., Johnny Weissmuller), the actor was classified into only one category (e.g., Hollywood stars who acted as lifesavers) but comments were made about his sporting career (e.g., Olympic winner in swimming), which actually belonged in another category (e.g., Hollywood film stars who were aquatic athletes).

Hollywood Film Stars Who Worked as Lifeguards

I discovered from my reviews that several Hollywood stars had had links with aquatics and water safety as lifeguards. The actor who starred as the first film James Bond, Sir Sean Connery, worked as a lifeguard in 1952 at Portobello Pool (Figure 1; Seanconnery.com, 2008; Tiscali Film, 2008). Jack Palance worked as a lifeguard at Jones Beach while he was a struggling actor (Baxter, 2006; Internet Movie Database, 2008; Soleint Communications, 2008). Gordon Scott, who acted as Tarzan, was a lifeguard at the Sahara Hotel in Las Vegas when he was discovered by Hollywood producer Sol Lesser (Associated Press, 2007). Christopher

Table 1 Hollywood Stars Who Either Worked as Lifeguards, Performed Lifeguard or Lifesaving Rescues, Drowned, or Were Aquatics Athletes

no	Star	Lifeguard	Lifeguard Rescue	Lifesaving Rescue	Drowned	Aquatic Athlete
1.	Sean Connery	x				
2.	Jack Palance	x				
3.	Gordon Scott	x				
4.	Christopher Atkins	x				
5.	Paul Hogan	x				
6.	Casper Van Dien	x				
7.	Clint Eastwood	x				x
8.	Jack Nicholson	x				
9.	Alexandra Paul	x				x
10.	Kelly Monaco	x				x
11.	Ronald Reagan	x	x			x
12.	Telly Savalas	x	x			
13.	Robert Mitchum			x		
14.	Marilyn Monroe				x	
15.	Charlie Chaplin			x		
16.	Michael Dunn			x		
17.	Phoebe Dorin				x	
18.	Keira Knightley				x	
19.	Johnny Weissmuller			x		x
20.	Annette Kellermann					x
21.	Aileen Riffin Soule					x
22.	Gertrude Ederle					x
23.	Eleanor Holm					x
24.	Esther Williams					x
25.	Buster Crabbe					x
26.	Eric Fleming				x	
27.	Carol Wayne				x	
28.	Jessica Savitch				x	
29.	Natalie Wood				x	
30.	Orville Reden- bacher				x	
31.	Joe Flynn				x	
32.	Ted McGinley	x				x
33.	Buddy Ebsen	x				x

Atkins was working as a lifeguard when he was asked to audition for *The Blue Lagoon* (Hollywood.com, 2008b). Paul Hogan who acted in the role as Michael J. "Crocodile" Dundee, had also worked as lifeguard (Solar Navigator, 2008). Casper Van Dien had worked both as an actor and as a lifeguard (Hollywood.com, 2008a). Clint Eastwood, Academy Award winning actor and director, found employment in Renton as a lifeguard and as a swimming instructor during an excursion to Texas (Figure 2; Film Reference, 2008; The Clint Eastwood Archive, 2008). The three-time Oscar winner actor, Jack Nicholson, had worked as a mailroom worker in a toy store and as a lifeguard (Kenny, 2008). Alexandra Paul (familiar to TV viewers as Lieutenant Stephanie Holden on the TV series *Baywatch*), had acted in 60 films and was a competitive endurance swimmer and lifeguard when she was a teenager (Figure 3; Von Dare, 2008; Wikipedia, 2008k). Kelly Monaco, who acted in 12 episodes of *Baywatch* and several Hollywood films, was also a swimmer and had worked for five years as a lifeguard (Virtualworld.com, 2008). Ted McGinley surfed and worked as a lifeguard at Newport Beach. He acted in numerous films and TV series, for example, *The Love Boat* and *Dynasty*. He also worked as a model while he was a water polo player (Best Collecting.com, 2009; Hollywood.com, 2009).

Hollywood Film Stars Who Performed Lifeguard Rescues

The literature search revealed that at least two Hollywood stars had performed drowning rescues as lifeguards. Possibly the most well known is the late U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who starred in many western films as a cowboy and who worked for six summers, seven days a week during his teenage years at the Lowel Beach (Figure 4). He reportedly rescued 77 people from the river's swift currents over the years, putting a notch in a log for every rescue he had made (Cable News Network, 2004). For his contribution to lifeguarding in 1991, he was awarded a marble relief cast depicting a Trireme Galley, 400 BC (Figure 5) by Lucas Bistarakis on behalf of the Greek Life Saving Association. The award was



Figure 1 — Sean Connery has acted in many Hollywood films, and he has worked as a lifeguard. Sean Connery on wall painting depicted as Richard I of England (Wikipedia, 2008e).



Figure 2 — Clint Eastwood has worked as actor and as a lifeguard. Figure reproduced with permission from Darren Allison.



Figure 3 — Alexandra Paul has worked as actress and lifeguard. Taken from Wikipedia (2008k). Alexandra competing in the Bonaire EcoSwim 10K race, taken by Ian Murray and released to the public domain.



Figure 4 — Ronald Reagan worked as a lifeguard when he was teenager. Illustration drawn by Fran Swarbrick. Taken from *Senville* (2008) with permission.

passed to the President by his Minister of Foreign Affairs because he was engaged in an important meeting at the time of the Greek visit (Figure 6; Avramidis, 2005). President Reagan was also the recipient of the Gold Medallion Award from the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF), an award that “is presented each year to a former competitive swimmer for his or her national or international significant achievement in the field of science, entertainment, art, business, education or government” (International Swimming Hall of Fame, 2006, p. 45).

Another actor, Telly Savalas, best known for playing the title role in the popular 1970s crime drama *Kojak*, worked as a lifeguard after graduation from high school. On one occasion Savalas was unsuccessful at rescuing a man from drowning. Reportedly this failure followed Savalas for the rest of his life (Wikipedia, 2008a).

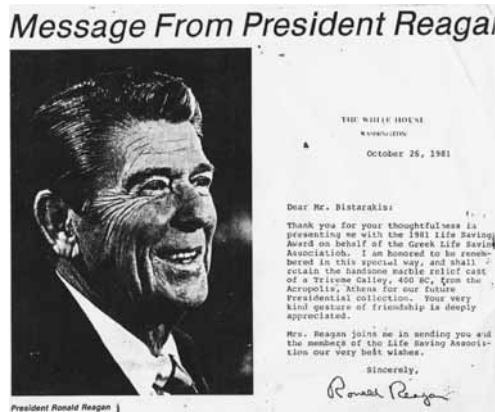


Figure 5 — Letter of thanks that the U.S. President, Ronald Reagan wrote to Mr. Lucas Bistarakis, who honored him for his services as a lifeguard. Taken from Avramidis (2005).



Figure 6 — Lucas Bistarakis (left) presents the award of the U.S. President to the Minister of Foreign Affairs because during the visit, Ronald Reagan was in a meeting. Taken from Avramidis (2005).

Hollywood Film Stars Who Acted as Lifesavers

Some other Hollywood actors, although not trained as lifeguards, have been credited as having performed drowning rescues. In 1954, Robert Mitchum assisted in the rescue of Marilyn Monroe who was working on *River of No Return* in Canada's Banff National Park (Figure 7) when she slipped on a rock and fell into the fast-moving Bow River. Los Angeles lifeguard Norm Bishop, who was working as a stuntman, dived in and grabbed her, keeping her afloat. The stunt director and actor, Robert Mitchum piloted a raft downriver to assist them (Rusmussen, 2005).

In 1917 during the filming of his last movie, *The Adventurer*, Charlie Chaplin rescued a seven-year-old girl from drowning after she had been swept into the waters from a rock as she watched the filming (Figure 8; Spout.com, 2008). Likewise, Michael Dunn saved Phoebe Dorin from drowning during the filming of the episode *The Night of the Murderous Spring*, plunging underwater to free her when her costume became entangled in machinery used to sink a boat on the set (Wikipedia, 2008b). In 2005 during the filming of *The Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, Keira Knightley was assisted to safety by a stand film crew member who was wearing fins, wetsuit, and a rescue tube, when she fell into the water from on board the ship as part of the script (Bruckeimer & Verbinski, 2005).

Another Hollywood star who performed a couple of drowning rescues was Johnny Weissmuller, a gold medal Olympic champion in swimming before starring in Tarzan films. The first incident occurred in 1926 when he was swim training in



Figure 7 — Marilyn Monroe was rescued by a lifeguard and Robert Mitchum during the filming of *The River of no Return*. Taken from Provincial Archives of Alberta (2008) with permission.



Figure 8 — Charlie Chaplin rescued a seven-year-old girl from drowning after she had been swept into the water from a rock while watching the filming of *The Adventurer*. Cropped screenshot from the film *The Adventurer* (Chaplin, 1917). Fair use.

Lake Michigan accompanied by his brother who was in a rowboat timing him. When they were a half mile from the shore, they heard a terrific explosion and screams of terror as a ferryboat began sinking into the water. Weissmuller jumped into the rowboat and rowed with his brother as fast as possible to the place of the accident. When they arrived, 85 children and their mothers were pinned under the waves in the wrecked ferry. They dived repeatedly into the lake, bringing up lifeless bodies. Of the 30 women and children the brothers lifted from the water, 15 were revived. One other time since that tragic day was Weissmuller a lifesaver again. The second incident occurred in 1933 while he was swimming with lifeguards at Santa Monica one afternoon. He saw a small boy struggling in the ocean's surf. The child disappeared from the surface before Weissmuller could get to him. Weissmuller found him unconscious and towed him to shore. When the little boy opened his eyes and saw him he gasped one word, "Tarzan" (Packer, 2004). In that year, Weissmuller got an "honorary" appointment to the Santa Monica Lifeguard squad, because the press reported that he had saved a 12-year-old boy who was sinking off the Municipal Pier (Figure 9; Geostan.com, 2008). Johnny Weissmuller was also an ISHOF honoree in 1965 as a swimmer and a Founding Chairman of the Board of the ISHOF (International Swimming Hall of Fame, 2006).



Figure 9 — Johnny Weissmuller, Hollywood star and Olympic swimmer, got an honorary appointment from the Santa Monica Lifeguard Squad as a lifeguard because he rescued a young boy. Figure is taken from Wikipedia (2008j). This work is in the public domain in the United States.

Hollywood Film Stars Who Were Aquatic Athletes

Annette Kellerman is best known as swimmer, actress, writer, inventor of synchronized swimming, and pioneer of women's swimwear. After suffering from infantile paralysis, Kellerman began swimming as therapy. In 1905, she became the first woman to attempt to swim the English Channel (Wikipedia, 2008g). Kellerman was famous for her advocacy for the right of women to wear a one-piece bathing suit, which was a controversial topic in the early 20th century. The popularity of her one-piece suits resulted in her own line of women's swimwear (Figure 10). The "Annette Kellermans" were the first step to modern swimwear (Wikipedia, 2008g). In court she defended herself by saying to the judge that if she were to swim in the customary garb of her day, she "may as well be swimming in chains" (Davies, 2002). "I can't swim wearing more stuff than you hang on a clothesline," she added (International Swimming, 2006; Wikipedia, 2008g). In 1916, Kellermann became the first major actress to do a nude scene when she appeared fully nude in "A Daughter of the Gods." She acted in a total of 23 films (Wikipedia, 2008g). The majority of her films had an aquatic theme. Many times she played mermaids named Annette (Nation Master, 2005). After "A Daughter of the Gods," she became the highest paid working woman in the world for almost a decade, earning about \$20,000 a month. Kellerman popularized swimming, pioneering synchronized swimming in unique ways and challenged society's myth that women were incapable of performing strenuous physical activities (International Swimming, 2006).

Aileen Riggin Soule was an elite aquatic athlete and later a Hollywood film star. She was the youngest and tiniest U.S. Olympic champion and the first women's



Figure 10 — Annette Kellermann was a swimmer, actress, writer, inventor of synchronized swimming, and pioneer of women's swimwear. Taken from Wikipedia, (2008g). This image was created in Australia and is now in the public domain.

Olympic springboard diving champion, which she achieved before the age of 14 years. In 1924 at the Olympics in Paris, she became the only female performer in Olympic history to win medals in both diving and swimming in the same Olympic Games. Later in her life, she helped launch “learn to swim programs” in different countries, gave diving exhibitions, taught swimming, lectured and wrote articles on fashion, sports fitness, and health for the *New York Post* and many other leading magazines. Finally, she acted in two films and organized Billy Rose’s first Aquacade in which she also starred during the 1937 Cleveland Exposition (International Swimming, 2008b).

Gertrude Ederle was an American competitive swimmer who also acted in Hollywood. In 1926, she became the first woman to swim across the English Channel. Before Ederle, only five men had been able to swim the English Channel (the best time had been 16 hr, 33 min). Ederle reached the beach of Dover, England in 14 hr and 39 min. When Ederle returned home (Figure 11), she went on to play herself in a movie (*Swim Girl Swim*) and tour the vaudeville circuit, including Billy Rose’s Aquacade. Because her manager mishandled her career, it is believed that Ederle failed to get the recognition and rewards she deserved. She was honored by the ISHOF in 1965 (Wikipedia, 2008f).

Eleanor Holm was an Olympic swimmer who also played in Hollywood films. At the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, California, Holm won her favorite event. Though she would appear in at least four films as herself, Holm (Figure 12) appeared in 1938 only in one Hollywood feature film, *Tarzan’s Revenge*, starring with Glenn Morris. At the 1939 New York World’s Fair, she did 39 shows per week at Rose’s Aquacade and cofeatured with Tarzan swimmers Johnny Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe (Wikipedia, 2008h).



Figure 11— Parade for Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim across the English Channel, coming up Broadway, New York City, with large crowd watching. Taken from Wikipedia (2008f). These files have been released into the public domain.



Figure 12 — Eleanore Holme was a competitive swimmer and Hollywood actress. Taken from Wikipedia (2008h). This work is in the public domain.

Esther Williams was another Hollywood actress who was an aquatic athlete. In 1940, the showmen Billy Rose and Johnny Weissmuller picked Williams to star opposite Weissmuller in the *Aquacade*. She also starred in numerous “swimming movies” (e.g., *Bathing Beauty* in 1944, *Neptune’s Daughter* in 1944, and *Million Dollar Mermaid* in 1952). For her 1953 movie, *Easy to Love*, her film company, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, built a pool in the shape of the state of Florida (Aquatics International Staff, 2003). Although in her autobiography the actress admitted that she had nearly drowned during some of the oxygen-defying stunts and was severely injured during some dives (Hernandez, 2008; Wikipedia, 2008c), her movie career greatly popularized competitive and synchronized swimming. Because of her, pools became an American symbol of success, luxury, and romance. Williams also put her name on a line of backyard pools, helping the growth of private swimming pools throughout the United States in the 1950s (Aquatics International Staff, 2003). For her contribution to aquatics, in 1996 she was given an award by the ISHOF (Wikipedia, 2008d).

Buster Crabbe was a successful Hollywood actor partially because of his success as a swimmer. He starred in *Flash Gordon*, *Buck Rogers*, and *Tarzan*, and appeared in nearly 170 films for top Hollywood producers. Crabbe had been an Olympic medal winner in swimming before his acting career (Figure 13; Wikipedia, 2008i). His swimming accomplishments included 16 world and 35 national swimming records. Finally he contributed to aquatics with his Buster Crabbe Swim Pools and a summer camp for boys near Saranac Lake in the Adirondack region of New York State (International Swimming, 2008a). For his contribution to aquatics, Crabbe was given a swimmer award by the ISHOF in 1964 (Wikipedia, 2008d).

Hollywood Film Stars Who Drowned

The literature search revealed several actors and actresses who died as a result of drowning. Actor Eric Fleming, starring in *Rawhide*, drowned in 1966 when his canoe capsized during the filming of a movie near the headwaters of the Amazon



Figure 13 — Buster Crabbe acted in many Hollywood Films and was an Olympic swimmer. Johnny Weissmuller, Eleanor Holm, Esther Williams, and Buster Crabbe (from left to right). Photo of the original picture taken in the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

in the Haullaga River in Peru (Celebrity Trivia Collection, 2008). Actress Carol Wayne, who played in many TV shows such as *The Tonight Show*, was found drowned in calm waters around Manzanillo, Mexico, where she was on vacation with a companion in 1985, at age 42 years. According to the reports, Wayne was fully clothed and had never liked going near the water since she could not swim. There were no cuts on her hands or abrasions to suggest a fall from the rocks that stood over the bay where her body was found (Prinalgin, 2007), neither were there any signs of drugs or alcohol in her body (Blogball, 2008).

Jessica Savitch was the NBC weekend news anchor for *The Nightly News* in 1983. Savitch, who had a rapid rise to fame in the media industry, also had a stormy personal life that included accusations of drug use. In 1983, Savitch was a back-seat passenger in a car driven by a friend as they returned from a dinner in Pennsylvania (Prinalgin, 2007). Apparently, the driver missed posted warning signs in a heavy rainfall and drove out of the wrong exit from the restaurant and up the towpath of the Pennsylvania Canal on the side of the Delaware River. The car veered over the edge into the shallow water of the canal, landed upside down, and sank into deep mud that sealed the doors shut. Savitch and companion were trapped inside as water poured in. When the car was discovered, her companion's body was still strapped behind the wheel, with Savitch and her dog in the rear. The coroner ruled that both had died of drowning. He noted that the driver was apparently knocked unconscious in the wreck but Savitch had struggled to try to escape (Blogball, 2008).

Actress Natalie Wood was 43 years old when she drowned off Catalina Island in Californian waters in 1981. She was on board a yacht with her husband, Robert Wagner, and the actor, Christopher Walken, with whom she was making the movie *Brainstorm*. It is likely that she slipped and then fell off the yacht or the dinghy that was attached to it. Wearing a heavy down coat that soon became saturated and kept her from being able to climb onto the dinghy, Wood eventually succumbed to the icy chill and drowned. She was legally intoxicated at the time of her drowning, which became one of those Hollywood mysteries that will never be fully resolved (Celebrity Trivia Collection, 2008; Prinalgin, 2007). A witness nearby heard calls for help at around midnight. Her cries lasted about 15 min and were answered by someone else who said, "Take it easy. We'll be over to get you," the witness recalled (Blogball, 2008). Wood, who had first come to prominence as an actress in *Miracle on 34th Street* in 1947, would also go on to become an Academy Award nominated star, headlining in movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Love With the Proper Stranger* (Celebrity Trivia Collection, 2008; Prinalgin, 2007).

Orville Redenbacher was 88 years old in 1995, when his body was found submerged in his Jacuzzi at his condo in California. He had suffered a heart attack and then drowned. Redenbacher made millions, becoming famous for appearing in dozens of commercials for his Orville Redenbacher popcorn. He first burst onto the national scene in the early 1970s, promoting his product. People actually wondered if he was an actor playing a role, which prompted Redenbacher to go on a number of talk shows to demonstrate that he really was the company owner (Blogball, 2008).

Actor Joe Flynn, who was 49 years old in 1974, had gone into the pool wearing a cast on his recently-broken leg and wound up dead on the bottom of the pool. He starred in the 1960s' hit comedy *McHale's Navy* and also in many Walt Disney movies (e.g., *The Love Bug* and *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes*). There was

some controversy surrounding his drowning death in the pool at his Beverly Hills home. Investigators surmised that he may have had a heart attack while swimming (Blogball, 2008; Prinalgin, 2007).

Conclusions

The present literature review revealed that a number of Hollywood film stars had been involved in aquatic sports and lifeguarding as well as aquatic emergencies. Some of them were national or Olympic level swimmers, who later in their lives became actors or actresses. Others worked as professional lifeguards before they started acting. Some performed drowning rescues either working as professional lifeguards or as amateur lifesavers. Finally, a few of them experienced fatal or nonfatal drowning incidents during filming or in their personal lives. While the sample is too small to make adequate comparisons with the general populace, I can conclude that celebrity sometimes comes from having achieved fame in aquatic activities but that same celebrity does not prevent one from suffering the tragedy of drowning.

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