

## Contact: Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, Key West, Florida

by Kenneth G. Gerken

It as a Friday the 13th I'll never forget. On February 13, 2004 while vacationing in Key West, Florida I came close to finishing my retirement years at age 66! My wife and I had left the Sigsbee Military Campground in our 27' Class "C" motor home for the beach. We headed for the Truman Annex Complex at about 'Mile Marker 1', adjacent to the Fort Zachary Taylor State Park Beach.

We arrived at the beach at 3 P.M. My wife Susan went off to check emails at the nearby Navy Recreation Center while I set out the chairs and towels. I applied sunscreen and went into the calm, warm 75 degree water and began swimming parallel to the beach.

Susan joined me at 4 P.M. She was looking forward to going for a swim. There was a comfortable 15 knot breeze from the South. I suggested we walk to the other end of the beach, on the East side, and swim back . We were floating on our backs, letting the gentle tide carry us, occasionally moving our arms for a little more motion.

We reached the end of the beach where our chairs were, when all of a sudden I felt as if I was being electrocuted. We were about 12-15 feet out from the beach in only 5 feet of water. I quickly looked off my right shoulder and saw a bottle-like jelly fish. It was 8" or 9" in diameter. My back, shoulders, chest and arms were engulfed in the tentacles.

In extreme pain (an '8' on a scale of '10' ) I raced out of the water, pulling off the blue tentacles from my chest and arms, and yelling for help. Susan had no idea what had happened. She did see my black beach shoe floating away, and first thought I'd been attacked by a shark. She didn't yet realize she too had gotten the tentacles on her arms.

Shaking with severe pain (now at a level of '9' ) I managed to get to the picnic area where many of the people on the beach came to me. I asked for Benadryl and someone had them. As I was shaking so much, I was fortunate to be able to swallow two capsules. I was also starting to hyperventilate. I knew I had to get to the hospital.

The only available car was packed with gear and not suitable. Someone used their cell phone and called 9-1-1 to send an ambulance. It was the worst pain I'd ever experienced in my life, now a full '10' . I was shaking and my hands and feet felt as if they were on fire.

Randy, a scuba diving instructor, came over to help and tried calming me in order to slow my breathing. But by then the pain was excruciating and I did not think I would stay conscious! He kept trying to calm me by saying "look at me, Ken" and even said " no one has ever died from a Portuguese Man of War sting."

I was still hyperventilating, shaking and burning up! The people from the beach were doing what they could. First they applied towels soaked with vinegar to my lashed back, chest and arms to ease the pain. Then they poured the vinegar all over me, but it didn't help. They tried bags of ice, putting them on my back, hands and feet. I don't know if it reduced the pain, but my shaking got worse and after a couple of minutes, they stopped applying the ice. Susan told me I looked very grey and my eyes were blood-shot. She had visions of being widowed a third time.



Kenneth Gerken shows serious stings after contact with a portuguese man of war in Key West, Florida on 2/13/04.

[See larger image](#)



A portuguese man-of-war also known as the blue bottle due to its "bottle bobbing" in the ocean. It has stinging tentacles that contain toxins which can seriously or fatally injure humans. [More info...](#)

After more than 30 minutes the ambulance finally arrived. The EMTs had to use a stretcher, because for me to walk barefoot on coral and tiny pine cones to the ambulance would have been problematic. My pain level had not let up. As we drove off, more towels with vinegar were applied, however I was still burning "10" in pain.

After leaving the beach for Stock Island Florida Keys Memorial Hospital, the EMTs asked me my social security number, address and some other necessary information. Somehow I was able to understand them, and with difficulty gave them the answers. Because I was still conscious and not 'code blue', the driver was not authorized to exceed the speed limit.

After about 10 minutes on the road, my pain level dropped to a '9'...maybe the Benadryl had kicked in, but the shaking and rapid breathing continued. The EMTs took my blood pressure and it was 200, forty-five minutes after being stung.

The trip to the hospital seemed to take forever. Finally I was wheeled into the Emergency Room, quickly diagnosed, and put on an I.V. with a strong narcotic. I was told it was stronger than Morphine. In about 2 or 3 minutes I felt tremendous relief. My blood pressure came down, my color improved, I could smile at the nurse and my wife, and I knew I was going to live! I truly had doubts I'd survive the ordeal. After the I.V. narcotic took effect, the nurse came in with steaming hot towels and applied them to my back and chest. These hot towels felt wonderful!

Randy, the scuba diver instructor, came to the hospital to see how I was doing and I gave him a thumbs-up! Even though he'd told me 'no one has ever died from a Man of War sting', I think he knew how close I was! My wife and I were very touched by his caring and concern.

Randy drove Susan back to the campground so she could enlist our friends to pick me up and she could get the prescriptions filled. The meds prescribed were: Methylprednisolone 4mg DosPak (a steroid to be taken over a 6 day period), Hydrocodone/APAP 5mg/500 mg tabs; and Benedryl, diphenhydramine tablets every 6 hours.

Friends prepared supper for us, I took the first dose of the Med-pak plus a pain pill and slept through the night. Amazingly there was no residual pain, even though my chest, back and arms looked like I had been whipped unmercifully, as this whole area was covered with angry red wavy-line welts. I should say here, Susan had some welts from the tentacles on both arms. Yet, perhaps because of the shock of my experience, she had no pain!

The only odd complication we both suffered was incredible itching....like a severe case of poison ivy. This started for both Susan and me, exactly six days after the stings! We both took benadryl and Susan used an anti-itching spray to alleviate the itch. My itching continued for over a week.

The nurse in the emergency room thought I might have some permanent scarring. Thankfully, the welts on my back, chest and arms have been helped by a vitamin E cream. She also said it was one of the worst cases of Man of War stings she'd ever seen.

After reading information on the internet, I know people have died from the stings. I feel so fortunate to have been in excellent physical condition. Golfing, playing racketball and tennis weekly, and biking certainly helped to get me through the trauma.

If you see Man Of War jelly fish in the water or washed up on the beach, please warn others. Even on an unguarded, swim-at-your-own-risk beach, signs should be posted during the season of the jelly fish. And a dead Man of War on the beach can still be harmful and sting people!

I've learned since in research that in one U.S. Portuguese Man of War incident, life guards sprayed papain solution

immediately on the victim's stings. Apparently it didn't help because within minutes the woman was comatose and later died.

If you are ever a victim, consider even the slightest breathing difficulty or altered level of consciousness a 'medical emergency'. Call for help and use an automatic epinephrine injector if available, or in the least, benadryl.

The Portuguese Man of War has stings equal to .75 that of Cobra venom and is potentially dangerous to humans. In fact these stings have been responsible for several deaths.

Many people see Friday the 13th as a 'bad luck day', but I'm happy I'll be around to celebrate a few more!