

Ord chasing the image of a lifetime in the waters off WA's South West coast. This image graces the cover of *One Shot*.  
Picture: Trent Slatter

# Soul searcher

Story *Connie Clarke*

*How one man's epic quest to find the perfect wave taught him to live without fear.*

**E**very winter near Half Moon Bay in northern California, some of the world's best big-wave riders gather at Mavericks, a notoriously deadly surf break in the northern Pacific Ocean.

On a cold January morning in 2011, Margaret River freelance photographer Russell Ord was on a break from his job as a firefighter in Bunbury when he ended up at Mavericks on a jet ski, snapping his trademark inside-the-tube images that have graced the covers of surfing magazines around the world.

Ord was on a whirlwind, 12-day US trip, meeting friends in Hawaii, and was never supposed to be in California that day. He only tagged along at the last

minute when one of his mates suggested visiting the infamous spot.

"It was quite a small day," Ord recalls of the surf break. "If you were going to learn how to surf Mavericks, that was the kind of day you would choose."

But just a few hours later, two rogue waves more than 7m high roared in one after the other, knocking most of the riders clean off their boards. Ord used his jet ski to fish out Alex, a Portuguese surfer whose board had been smashed by the second monster wave. As Alex was clambering on to Ord's jet ski, the pair spotted what looked like a body floating in the water, but lost sight of it.

"We had a search around but couldn't find him," Ord »



says. “And then I went around the rocks and saw this paddler who started waving to me, and I knew straight away what he was waving about.”

Lying face up and lifeless was Jacob Trette, an experienced surfer who had surfed Mavericks for the first time the day before. “He looked pretty much like he was dead to me,” Ord says. They rolled Trette on to the sled attached to the jet ski and took him up to the beach. A veteran firefighter, Ord’s instincts took over. “I just did what you have to do,” he says. “I dragged him on to the beach and drained some water out of him, rolled him on his side, put him in a recovery position and checked his pulse. He had a pulse, which surprised me. Then I gave him a couple of little pumps.”

When he started coughing and spluttering every 15 to 20 seconds, it became clear that Trette might survive, but only because the dominoes all fell in his favour that day. “He just got really lucky,” Ord says. “Lucky the water was super cold. Lucky I decided to go around the rocks. Lucky I knew how to do resuscitation. Lucky we were close to a world-class hospital.”

For the next few days, Ord was anointed a hero by TV, newspaper and radio crews in the US, and was courted by talk shows across the country to tell his story. He was the brave firefighter from Australia who had saved a man from dying while doing what he loves.

The near-death incident had a big impact, reminding Ord just how fleeting life can be. When he arrived back in WA, something had changed in him, and the idea that had been growing roots in his mind for years really took hold.

“You’re dealing with death all the time working in the fire brigade,” Ord says. “You might have to cut someone out of a car or drag someone from a burning house. It reminds you that life can change in seconds. I met this old guy not long after the US trip when I was travelling up north and he was coming the other way. He had worked his whole life at Bunnings and he spent most of that time planning for his retirement. When that day finally came, he bought this beautiful 4WD and caravan and he was travelling with his wife when she had a massive heart attack.”

The universe was sending him a message. But it would take the former rugby league player and father of three two more years to build the courage to follow through with his plan.

About the same time in Perth, Darren McCagh, an offshore oil rigger, was transforming into a writer, producer and film director. McCagh had met Ord on a Yallingup beach the year before. “I was trying to find my filming legs and getting to know how to work the camera when Russell came up and started talking to me,” McCagh recalls. He found Ord intriguing. Despite being among the world’s best surf photographers, he was completely uninspired by his own body of work.

“Ordy is a real character,” McCagh says. “When I first met him, I’d heard his name and knew he was a great photographer, but he was so frustrated with the amount of money that people could make, especially when people wanted to pay photographers in board shorts.”

They became good friends and a couple of years later, when McCagh was in Margaret River, Ord had



Far left: Ord’s image of surfer Chris Ross during one of his first attempts at swimming ‘the right’ off Walpole, in WA’s South West. Above and left: Ord enjoys snapping images of the ocean’s power, without the pressure of capturing athletes and meeting deadlines. “It’s all about floating around at sea on your own, it’s so peaceful,” he says.

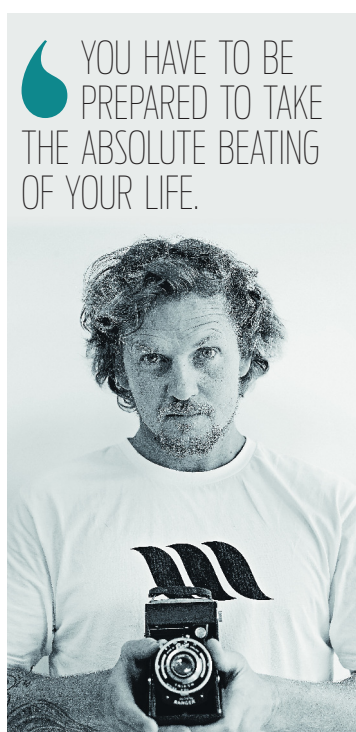
another rant. “He was frustrated that he was shooting the same s... as everybody else, and he wanted to push himself harder to get that one unbelievable shot,” McCagh says.

Ord’s hardcore quest to chase the image of his life was the perfect fodder for a short documentary film, so McCagh started following the veteran firefighter and photographer around, capturing the complex internal struggle of a man caught between living a secure existence and grabbing life by the throat.

McCagh and Ord started a fundraising page with Pozible and were amazed at the support they received, raising just over \$16,000. “That didn’t even touch the sides,” Ord says. “We spent a lot of money and dedicated a lot of time. There are 50 interviews that never made the cut.”

Still working four-day shifts as a firefighter, running a photography business and taking his surf shots down at “the right”, a surf break off Walpole in the South West, there wasn’t much time left for his wife, Catherine, and their three children, Kalani, Tavian and Ayla.

Three years after he saved Trette from the treacherous California surf, and after meeting him and his family in the US – a reunion captured by McCagh’s camera for their film – Ord knew something had to give. “You don’t always realise that you only get one shot at life,” Ord says. “It was a really difficult decision



to quit my job because being in the fire brigade is a really good gig – you get paid every week for starters.

“Like most people, I thought financial security was the most important thing in the world when you have a family and you have a mortgage. I always thought that being a good father was about being able to provide for your kids, but really it’s about being there for them and showing them how to live your life fearlessly.”

It’s taken almost four years and McCagh moving to Margaret River to make it happen, but *One Shot: An Image and an Attitude* was finally completed earlier this year and recently aired on the ABC.

“One Shot is about a guy who wants to have his moment, and live his life with no regrets. So few of us actually do it,” McCagh says. “Russell spent a lot of time in very dangerous waters waiting for just the right swell. I wanted to capture that grind and the sheer hard work

that goes into capturing those images.” The waters near ‘the right’ generate some of the heaviest waves in the world, while a big channel nearby brings in sharks from the Indian Ocean.

“It was super-calculated,” Ord says. “I thought about all of the ‘what if’ scenarios. ‘What if I drown? What if a shark takes me?’ I put a lot of effort into making sure that I wasn’t going to put my life or anyone else’s life in danger.”

But ditching the jet ski was the only way Ord could capture the image he’d seen in his mind for all those years. “We were capturing images and moments from the safety of the jet ski, but I wasn’t really challenging myself,” Ord says. “You want to get that feeling of being in the water. When you’re shooting a wave like ‘the right’, you have to be prepared to take the absolute beating of your life. You have to deal with the size, the power, the conditions, the great whites. It’s crucial to live in the moment, stay focused and not think about what might be swimming below you.”

Two years into having a crack at taking that one shot, he finally got it in 2014, but when Ord got back to the safety of his studio, the image was out of focus. It took another year for him to be satisfied that he had taken “the” shot. “When you nail a particular shot in your head, it’s incredible,” Ord says. “Four days of 20-foot-plus waves and I finally got it. It made the cover of *Tracks* magazine but it took me three years.

“My favourites are the ones where you can see the effort that went into them. You have to hold your breath underwater for long periods of time and you have to swim laps underwater to get yourself in the right position. You have to be fit and comfortable in those big waves.”

He says there are fewer than 10 shots he’s taken in his career that he can honestly say he’s really happy with. “I realised that I was never really in love with photography,” Ord says. “It’s just being in love with the ocean that drove me, because it’s so big you can feel its energy and its power. You’re up close and personal with some of the most powerful waves on the planet.”

Ord is now launching himself into another water-based challenge. Last week he flew to New Zealand to be with his family, and they are thinking of sailing the Pacific for a few years on a 32m ex-navy gun ship owned by Catherine’s uncle. He says he will now follow her dream, after the staunch support she gave him. “I don’t know how she does it,” he says. “She keeps everything together and she puts up with me. Whatever she decides, that’s what we’re doing next.”

The family have bought a 12ha property in Waipu, NZ, and plan to live off the land, in-between their sailing adventure. “You don’t want to have any regrets in life – you can’t keep making excuses,” Ord says. “You just have to go for it.”

*One Shot* airs on ABC iView until May 11.

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