

Bridge of despair

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

In Homer's *Odyssey* the Sirens' song was an enchanting tune, impossible to resist, that lured lonely sailors toward a perilous shoreline, where they would die when their ships crashed against the jagged rocks. In the mesmerizing documentary *The Bridge*, the Sirens' song is the strange allure of San Francisco's magnificent Golden Gate Bridge.

More people kill themselves at the Golden Gate Bridge than at any other spot in the world. In 2004, the year that the film chronicles, 24 people leapt from the bridge. Only one survived to tell the tale (which he does, in graphic detail). By focusing on these two dozen, the film also manages, in a curious way, to focus on all of us who have considered taking the final plunge into Hamlet's "undiscovered country."

Director Eric Steel, who had grown weary of being a highly paid pencil-pusher in the movie business (he was once an executive at Disney), was searching for a topic to start a filmmaking career when he read Tad Friend's 2003 article in the *New Yorker* about the number of people who leap off the Golden Gate Bridge each year.

Armed with a pair of minicameras and permission from police to shoot the bridge over a long period of time, Steel and his main cinematographer, Peter McCandless, shot continuously during the daylight hours for a year. They zeroed in on any people who hesitated as they crossed on a pedestrian walkway or who looked as if they might be ready to jump (such signs included taking out a wallet, watch or cell phone and leaving it on the ground).

According to Steel, whenever someone seemed serious about jumping, the filmmakers would call the police, whose job it is to thwart suicide attempts. Though they supposedly managed to save a few people, they obviously knew that the police wouldn't be able to get to all of them in time, which makes for some awfully dramatic—if morally dubious—footage of people hurtling to their death.

Though the jumpers' lives are the main focus of the film, much of the 93-minute movie zeroes in on those who had either a long-term or momentary connection to

the jumpers. These include witnesses passing by at the moment, strangers taking photographs from the bridge, and hearty sail-surfers enjoying the water below.

More poignant are the interviews with friends and family of the deceased. Many of these are painful to listen to, such as those with a woman who regrets that she didn't intervene when a friend talked about killing himself, a couple who tried to help when their friend showed signs of despair and depression, and most tragic of all, the sad parents who did all they could to help their emotionally disturbed son for years and years, moving him from institution to institution and medication to medication, until they finally had to let him go, hoping that he might find peace somewhere else.

The majority of the jumpers are revealed to be mentally ill, usually with paranoid schizophrenia or a bipolar condition. Others have been clinically depressed or emotionally scarred for years. A few appear to have been reacting to a specific loss, such as the death of a mother or a failed relationship.

Some critics of the film, which has a limited release, argue that there should have been more in it about the specific mental illnesses that haunted the jumpers or about the movement in San Francisco to build a barrier on the bridge that would make it much harder to jump.

The film is more drama than documentary. It offers its handful of supporting players the sort of attention and understanding that many of them either had never received before or were incapable of taking to heart.