Our Ocean Backyard

Gary Griggs

Column No. 339

The Loss of a Local Legend

On April 11, Ed Larson, a local legend to those who were fortunate to know him, passed away. Ed was 96 and was well loved and appreciated by all of those who ever met him. He was truly part of the greatest generation.

I was first introduced to this amazing man a year and a half ago when a mutual friend, Bill Simpkins, sent me a story that Ed had written and wondered if I might make into a column. I realized as soon as I started reading what a treasure this story was and wanted to meet the guy who wrote it. I gave him a call and drove over to his beach cottage in the Seabright neighborhood. This began a friendship that ended way too soon.

The story Bill Simpkins sent me was about an F4U Corsair plane crash and rescue in the ocean north of Santa Cruz in 1953 on a cold, dark October night. This intriguing account extended out over four different columns and led to my writing several other stories taken from Ed’s engaging writing.

Ed at the time was a 95-year old aviator, sailor, fisherman, former junior high art teacher and school administrator, and also a talented artist and writer. He had a life-long infatuation with airplanes and flying. During World War II, he became one of the youngest pilots stationed in the China-Burma-India theater, and who flew an assortment of old, battered cargo planes over what was known as “the hump” to deliver needed supplies into China during the war to support the allied efforts.

The hump was the eastern end of the Himalayas and flying over it was a challenging and extremely dangerous operation due to the height of the mountains, the lack of reliable charts, an absence of radio navigation aids, no adequate airfields, and little weather information. These brave guys were flying by the seat of their pants more often than not. Before his 21st birthday, Ed had already co-piloted five-round trip missions across the hump of the Himalayas from India to China. But he survived and lived 75 more years of adventures in the air and at sea.

He had a special gift of writing with a style that was engaging, interesting, fascinating, and poetic. Every sentence was carefully crafted, and even when his eyes began to fail him, he would dictate his words and sentences carefully to a friend. Writing is difficult enough with a keyboard in front of you when you can delete and reword or start again. Dictating his most recent books provided me with some measure of how Ed really thought and perceived the world. He simply had an amazing way with words, a skill and an art that in all of my writing, I have never managed to achieve. And it seems as though these words and sentences just rolled effortlessly off his tongue, which he told me was not the case. But then Ed has always been a modest and unassuming guy.

Ed always found comfort around boats and the Santa Cruz Harbor, where he was a well-known and frequent visitor. Spending time on fishing boats in Alaska while much younger, he said he identified with fishermen, because they knew their boats smell and how their engines work.

Through a family member discovering the hundreds of letters Ed had written during the war, he was encouraged to write about his life. With some urging, he did and his life story– Spear-Carrier in a Backwater War – which was published in 2014, was fascinating, enthralling and poetic from beginning to end and included dozens of old photographs and also some of Ed’s delightful sketches. You have to read this book to get an appreciation of the wonderful man Ed Larson was and how he looked at people and life.

His description of the Santa Cruz Harbor, which he brought joy to is symbolic of Ed’s writing and perspective: “*I use to look at our harbor as a fine sea chowder, always robust and filled with the spice of its fascinating people, inherent beauty, and new and exciting experience. It soon became a meal I couldn’t turn down! The harbor’s people are as varied and intriguing as can be found. Ethnicity, social and financial status, and circumstances are washed away by a commonality of interest and the shared wealth of being a part of the human panorama of this special place*”.

I met with Ed a month or so ago as he wanted to give me a copy of his most recent book – *Echoes on the Wind* – a delightful story about his experiences on the first and last fishing boats that he loved, from Alaska to Monterey Bay. “*The morning’s storm has scoured the forest and bay to visual perfection. Where the sky remains threatening gray, it is crisscrossed now by herring gulls whose whiteness matches the virginal hue of a store-bought wedding gown*.”

Sitting with him in his cozy Seabright living room you could always count on a rich and wide ranging conversation, and while he would sometimes take a few moments to recall a date or name, he had an incredible memory of 96 years of adventure, what kind of plane he was flying, where he took off from, where he landed and the problems in between.

He dedicated his autobiography to “*Yeoman Marilyn K. Larson, USN, my fellow warrior and beloved wife: Still at the threshold of youth, we met. In a time of peril and on winds of war, we journeyed to far-flung lands. At destiny’s direction, for sixty-three years, we discovered together the wondrous adventure of two lives interwoven with love and respect. She filled my days with joy and the anticipation of each new and thrilling tomorrow. She made me more than I imagined I could ever be.”*

*“In the end, with her passing, the music stopped. One wonders if it will ever truly begin again”.*

They just don’t make guys like Ed Larson anymore.