Our Ocean Backyard—Santa Cruz Sentinel columns by Gary Griggs, Distinguished Professor of Earth Sciences, UC Santa Cruz

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Zero Dark 30—A Pilot Goes Into the Sea

This is an amazing story of an ocean rescue that I owe to Bill Simkins, who sent me a copy of an original manuscript by Ed Larson. Ed is a 95-year old Santa Cruz aviator, author and artist. During WWII, 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.

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. Before his 21st birthday, he had already co-piloted five-round trip missions across the hump of the Himalayas from India to China. But Ed survived and lived to later write about his wartime experiences. He still lives in the Seabright neighborhood.

It’s a local story, a fascinating account of survival against all odds, that I’m going to try to retell from Ed’s much longer and more poetic writing. It involves two men who didn’t know each other, but whose lives came together on a very dark night in October of 1953. Somewhat like an earlier story I had written about two brothers washed from their Hobie Cat several miles off Santa Cruz at dusk, and the efforts to locate and rescue them, this is another story that could have ended very differently.

One of the two main characters, was Paul Groszman, a local fisherman whose days began before dawn and usually ended well after sunset. The fishing boat, the “Tuna,” was his pride, his life and his livelihood and had provided a reasonable income for Paul and his family. 1953 had been a good year for cod and salmon, but the best fishing days were winding down and with the fall and winter winds coming, anchoring his boat off the Santa Cruz Wharf would soon become dangerous. His boat was the only one left now as the others had headed south to safer anchorages in Moss Landing or Monterey.

As he anchored his boat and rowed a small skiff to the wharf he was feeling the back pain of working on the Tuna’s old Chrysler engine that day. He tied up his skiff, climbed the ladder to the wharf and looked back at his boat, rolling in the evening swell. By keeping his boat here a little longer he could hopefully make a few more dollars, but the warm sunny days of summer, the crowds and the other boats were all gone, and he realized it was about time for him to leave also. On the way to his car Paul made the decision to move the Tuna south over the coming weekend.
He drove home, climbed the front porch steps, walked through the front door and greeted his wife, Helen. She mentioned their daughter Connie had called, just to see how they were doing. Connie was married to Jack Buchholtz, a local policeman who would work the four till midnight shift that evening. On his days off, Jack and a crewman, Harlow Webber, would help Paul when the fish were running heavy, as it took all three of them to handle everything that needed to be done on the 42-foot Tuna.

After dinner, Paul relaxed for a short time in his favorite chair, and listened to the post-armistice activities involving the Korean War on the radio. He had some connection with the war and had served in the Naval Reserve during those years. Paul had used his fishing boat as a shore taxi for visiting naval vessels and also took some training classes at the small naval radar station located in the hills above Santa Cruz. The station had monitored ship and aircraft movements in the offshore area during the war, and now that it was over, he realized the station would soon be dismantled.

Dead tired, he took a shower, said good night to Helen, and tried to read in bed. By ten o’clock, however, the day’s work hit him and he fell fast asleep. But his much needed rest was about to be interrupted.