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

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A Routine Night Flight Turns Bad

We left Paul Groszman two weeks ago, after a long tiring day on his fishing boat, Tuna, having just fallen asleep on a dark October night. He had some special personal traits growing out of his childhood days that were going to become important in the long evening ahead.

When still quite young, Paul had gotten into a horrible bicycle accident while running an errand for his widowed mother. He ended up with a concussion and a fractured skull, which took months to recover from and took nearly a year from his childhood. But he learned from this experience how to accept and deal with adversity. Paul’s father, who was an educator who worked with handicapped children, had sadly died a year before his bicycle accident. But he had instilled in his son a commitment to the needs of others and a sense of compassion, which never left Paul.

There is another person in this story, however, Stephen Dutton Jr. He came out of the Midwest and knew from an early age that airplanes were to be in his future. Born a year before the stock market crash and the beginning of the Great Depression, he had experienced hard times and grew up learning that a dime was good pay for mowing a large lawn.

When Steve was just seven, and at a time when cash was hard to come by, his father paid a friend $5.00 to fly Steve around the local airport in an old biplane. This singular experience pretty much cemented his future, and he knew then that he was going to fly. Steve’s adolescent year were mostly spent in the basement of their house in Des Moines, Iowa, building model airplanes out of balsa wood and rice paper, and reading magazines about airplanes and flying.

He took a few flying lessons with his paper route money while still in high school, and after graduating from Iowa State in engineering in 1949, joined the Naval Air Force. In 1953, a few years later, married and with a two-year old son, he was assigned to the U.S. Navy Air Base at Moffett Field. Steve joined a squadron flying the last of the propeller driven navy fighter planes, the F4U Corsair. The Corsair was a five-ton, big, cranky, but fast and powerful airplane. It was a key player in the WW II Pacific battles but was a holdover from an earlier era.

On this same late-October night when we left Paul Groszman sound asleep about 30 miles away in Santa Cruz, Steve and his two squadron-mates were going on a three-plane mission to identify, track and then close on target planes posing as enemy patrol bombers. This was common practice in post-war years and was designed to keep pilot’s
skills honed in the event that they were ever needed.

At 9:45 pm, Steve and his wingmen taxied their planes to the active runway and went through their pre-takeoff checklist, a routine procedure. Ten minutes later, the pilots received takeoff clearance, and forty seconds later they were airborne. The lights of Sunnyvale soon were left behind as they flew over Palo Alto at 4000 feet, into a night that was darker than it should have been in October. It was now 10:00, the same time Paul Groszman turned off his reading light in Santa Cruz.

The three planes crossed the coast at San Gregorio, leveled off at 12,000 feet and turned northward towards the Farallons, offshore from the Golden Gate. Reaching those islands, which was the beginning of their search route, they turned southeast and switched on their radar to start searching for any potential enemy aircraft that would be coming from the west at an unknown altitude.

The pilots flew southeast in the dark night with no lights visible anywhere except the dimly lit, ghostly green glow of their instrument panels, with their radar searching for any targets ahead. Two and a half miles below them was the cold dark and hostile Pacific Ocean. In his focus on the search and keeping his attention on his radar screen, however, Steve had not noticed the violent swing of the needle on his ammeter, telling him there was a short in the plane’s battery circuit. His first indication of impending disaster was the smell of burning insulation filling the cockpit of his Corsair.

Surrounded by the darkness outside, it took him a few seconds to accept the reality of the situation. He quickly realized that he and his plane were in serious trouble. The red hot wires in the engine’s aft section had burned everything close by and the oil residue had now also started to ignite. His wingmen soon noticed the first yellow flashes of flame coming from his plane and realized that Steve Dutton’s Corsair, one of the heroes of the war in the Pacific was going down.

This story will certainly be continued. But, I wanted all readers to know that Our Ocean Backyard – Collected Essays 2, which includes the last four years of biweekly columns is now available as a book at both the Seymour Marine Discovery Center and will be in Bookshop Santa Cruz by this coming Wednesday- it’s a perfect holiday present for all of your family and friends and in fact, anyone you know.