Lost in a Dark Ocean

Several miles offshore and somewhere south of Davenport on that very dark October night in 1953, the cockpit of Lt. Steve Dutton’s Corsair had quickly turned into a suffocating death trap. He had to make some quick decisions, the first being to push down on his radio button and call out “Mayday, Mayday, she’s burning, I’m going out”.

He released the canopy over the cockpit, freed himself of his seat and shoulder straps, and then rolled the burning plane upside down. Steve felt his body being pulled out of the cockpit followed immediately by the sharp impact and severe pain of his right leg and chest hitting the tail of the airplane. He was now disoriented and tumbling through twelve-thousand feet of dark night, heading for the cold lonely ocean below. He was finally able to locate the cord to pull on his parachute harness, which when it opened, painfully twisted his fractured leg. Hope for a successful outcome was disappearing quickly for Steve at this point.

He felt another gush of pain when his broken leg hit the water, followed by a surge of cold as the seawater filled his coveralls and saturated his flight jacket. He was still alert enough to pull the inflation lanyard on his life jacket, but only one side inflated as the other had been ripped during the collision with the tail of his plane. In all of the pain and cold he was still able to reach the tiny rescue light, now badly dented and holding on to the life vest by a few threads, and turn it on. While the glow seemed feeble in the darkness that surrounded him, it gave him some hope in the silence and cold that now completely immersed him.

Steve’s mayday message had fortunately been picked up immediately by the radar station on the hill in Santa Cruz, which had sent a message to Moffett Field, to the Coast Guard station in Monterey, and to Jack Buchholtz on the night patrol in his Santa Cruz Police cruiser.

Jack drove quickly to a payphone on the municipal wharf, and at 11:30 pm, called his father-in-law, Paul Groszman, who had just fallen asleep after a long day at sea. Jack knew Paul’s boat was the only one still in the water, and was also the closest vessel to where Steve Dutton had bailed out of his plane. While it took a few seconds for Paul to understand what had happened, there was no hesitation and he was immediately wide awake and determined to find the missing pilot.

It took just 16 minutes for Paul, Jack and Harlow Webber, the other crew member, to get on board the “Tuna”, which was tied up off the wharf, start the engine and cast off the mooring line. They each felt a strong sense of urgency to do everything possible to
provide at least a slim chance of rescuing the pilot of the Corsair in the dark water ahead. There was a response back at Moffett Field as well, as pilots zipped up their flight jackets and buckled on their own life vests. But they were too far away and the only hope for Steve Dutton was the Tuna, heading north through the dark Pacific swells.

Steve Dutton’s two wing-mates in their Corsairs continued to circle the site at low altitude where the plane had gone down, periodically dropping magnesium flares, which briefly lit up the darkness below. As the minutes passed, however, their fuel gauges were heading towards empty.

With the Tuna’s Chrysler engine running at full throttle, the small boat plunged through the waves on its way north. Intuitively, Paul Groszman headed the Tuna away from the bright glare of the flares, guessing that the wind and swell would carry the pilot, if he were still alive and floating, away from the crash site. He had turned off all of the boat’s lights except for one at the top of the mast, which would give the three men a better chance of seeing someone, and hopefully a light, in the dark water and provide some small measure of hope.

The Tuna had covered about six miles running at full speed when Paul first heard an ominous sound from the engine. It was a faint knocking, gradually increasing in intensity. Paul knew his engine well and that something was seriously wrong. He quickly flipped on the lights of the instrument panel and swore as he saw the needle on the engine temperature gauge had stuck at the top of the red zone. This was the last thing he wanted to see or needed at this moment.

A cooling water line had broken loose under the pressure of their full speed run and now the engine had overheated. Paul yelled at Jack to take the wheel while he grabbed a kettle full of water from the galley. He headed for the stern, threw open the engine cover and poured the entire contents of the kettle into the empty radiator, hoping to keep the old Chrysler alive for a few more miles.