At Last, Pilot is Rescued

Just as Paul Groszman emptied the last drops of water from the teakettle into the empty radiator tank on the overheated Chrysler engine, he heard Harlow Webber scream, “Jesus, he’s out there. He’s out there, I see his light”.

Paul soon spotted the faint glow of a light about 50 yards ahead of them off the starboard bow. Harlow shouted twice into the dark night, “We’re here. We’re here”. The hot engine managed to keep the Tuna moving slowly towards the light, which alternately appeared and disappeared in the swells. The three men were now silent, each of them in their own minds feeling that they were part on a slowly unfolding miracle. Against all odds, the light of a small needle in a huge haystack of dark ocean and sky surrounding them had brought the Tuna to Lt. Steve Dutton.

Compassion led them up the coast despite Paul’s rationale mind telling him that the odds of finding a downed pilot in this dark October ocean were very, very low. As they drew ever closer to the faint light, Steve Dutton, in a hoarse voice called out, “I knew you’d find me. I knew you’d find me. I saw your light”.

It took all of the energy the three of them had to get the soaked and cold pilot out of the sea and into the boat. As they pulled him over the wooden railing, he let out a scream of pain, which is when they noticed his bent and broken leg. Steve was barely conscious at this point from the hour and half in the cold water and the pain from the collision with the tail of his plane.

They carried him carefully below deck into a bunk where Harlow massaged his hands and arms and Paul covered him with some old blankets. They turned the Tuna around and headed back for the lights of the pier, six miles away, with the engine sounding worse by the minute. Steve Dutton was barely conscious, but he was alive, although he probably wouldn’t have been in another 15 or 20 minutes in the cold water. In his dazed condition, and in a faint voice, he asked, “Hey skipper, what in hell’s wrong with your engine?”

Paul had radioed that they had recovered the pilot and that he was alive. The news spread quickly in town and as the Tuna crawled slowly towards the landing alongside the wharf, people had gathered. As they pulled up to the dock, the old Chrysler engine, her job done, breathed her last gasps with the bearings melting down along with some other failures. Steve Dutton was carried on a stretcher up to a waiting ambulance, which headed off towards the old Sister’s Hospital with its siren wailing in the dark night.

Knowing their wing-mate had been rescued, the two remaining Corsair pilots turned inland, gained altitude and headed back towards Moffett Field while they still had some fuel left in their tanks. The Coast Guard cutter from Monterey, now halfway across the bay, turned around and headed back to the breakwater. Jack Bucholtz, still on duty, took off his wet fishing jacket, walked to his police car, started it and slowly pulled out and headed towards Pacific Avenue to
see what the rest of the night might bring. Harlow Webber left next. He started up his old Ford pickup, said good night to Paul, and drove slowly off into the dark.

Paul Groszman was alone now, and leaning against the rail along the edge of the pier. He looked out at the flashing light on the one-mile buoy and could also hear the faint but reassuring sound of its bell. It had been a long day, with a long night added on for good measure to test a man’s dedication, perseverance and sense of purpose. The last boat in the water this fall, his boat, had been there when needed. He trusted his intuition and set a course from the wharf and found that very small point of light and life in an otherwise dark and cold ocean. And the old engine had kept turning over just long enough to find Steve Dutton and then bring them all safely back home. He had saved another man’s life, which warmed Paul’s heart for the rest of his.

Lt. Steve Dutton recovered from his injuries and trauma. Several weeks later he drove over to Santa Cruz to pay a visit to Paul and give him a check from the U.S. Navy for a new engine for the Tuna. Sadly, both Paul and his son-in-law Jack, have passed away, but still have family in Santa Cruz. The trail from Lt. Steve Dutton grew faint over the subsequent sixty-six years and no one seems to know what happened to him, but he survived a most harrowing adventure and lived to tell about it, thanks to the dedication of Paul, Jack and Harlow.

My deep and sincere thanks to my new friend, Ed Larson, for sharing this story with me to retell in this column.