By 6:00 pm on July 1, 1997, Jack Lish was still perched very uncomfortably on the hull of his overturned 14-foot aluminum boat. Remember this isn’t a young kid, but a guy in his mid-70s. He had capsized about seven hours earlier following the impact with a large wave several miles southeast of Capitola. He had gotten much colder by now and had drifted nearly five miles since the incident and found himself off of Manresa State Beach.

Being mid-summer, Jack could see and hear people still swimming and playing in the water along the beach, but no one saw him on his overturned boat. He tried to stand on the hull and shout in order to be seen, but almost immediately fell off into the water. He was also being carried farther south and into deeper water and he knew it would get dark before too long, which would make a rescue increasingly unlikely.

About this time, Vern Martin, a lifeguard on duty at Manresa Beach, thought he heard a weak call or voice from offshore, but didn’t immediately notice anything. A woman nearby walked over to Vern and told him that she thought she had seen an object, something red some distance offshore that appeared and disappeared as the swells rolled by. This led the lifeguard to climb onto his tower and get out his binoculars. After a short time, Vern also noticed the red of Jack’s parka about a mile offshore against the gray blue of the ocean. He ran to his patrol vehicle that was parked near the tower and flashed his lights offshore in an effort to let Jack know that he had finally been seen.

Vern and another lifeguard on the beach at the time, Haven Livingston, informed Head State Lifeguard Jason Hajduk (now the Fire Chief for the City of Santa Cruz) of the situation and then ran to their inflatable Zodiac rescue boat, which was fortunately on the beach nearby. They quickly got their boat into the water and were fortunately able to locate Jack within about 20 minutes of the time they first spotted him.

Jack was cold and also bloody from being cut by the sharp aluminum keel of his boat after over seven hours lying on top of it. With a little effort, Vern and Haven got him into their Zodiac, and with another lifeguard, Cory Miller, wrapped him in blankets and took care of his cuts. In an interview with Ed Larson soon after the rescue, Jack was impressed with the compassion and professionalism of these young lifeguards who had found and rescued him from what could easily have been the story of another mariner lost at sea.

Once on the beach, Jack asked that they get hold of his wife, Clara, who was still on the wharf in Capitola with no idea of what had happened. Jason contacted the wharf by radio, and three lifeguards went back out to the overturned boat, turned it over, and then with the help of Philip Delano, the operator of Vessel Assist, towed Jack’s boat back to the Capitola wharf.
Clara Lish drove to Manresa Beach and, at 7:00 pm, nearly 12 hours after Jack started on his calm weather day of fishing, they were reunited. He was still wet, a little bloodied, but alive.

Later in the Harbor Café, Jack and Clara again praised and thanked the young lifeguard crew who had responded so quickly and saved Jack’s life. Asked if he would do anything different the next time he went out fishing, Jack said “I’ll sure as heck wear a whistle around my neck from now on”.

There are a large number of things that can wrong on any boat once you get a few miles offshore, and the swell is often considerably larger. A catalogue of ship losses compiled by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary lists 463 individual lost vessels in sanctuary waters. Only 25 of these met their end along the Santa Cruz County coastline, however, with most of them lost along the rugged Big Sur coast. Most of these accounts listed the cause of loss as foundering or sinking offshore, with a handful of others stranded on the shoreline. The SS Palo Alto at Seacliff, while suffering the effects of a century of wear and tear, is the only one of the lot that was intentionally stranded, and the only one, other than a barge at the Salinas River mouth, still visible at the surface today along the Monterey Bay shoreline.

I get requests from time to time about the availability of earlier columns and wanted readers to know that both Our Ocean Backyard Volume 1 (the first six years), and Our Ocean Backyard Volume 2 (the next four years) are available at the gift shop at the Seymour Marine Discovery Center and at Bookshop Santa Cruz.