

Blue Water & Me

Tall Tales of Adventures With My Father

By

Penn Wallace

Part 1

Chapter 1 – I Go To Sea

“Pescado,” Papa yells as he tosses a fish over his shoulder. He turns and reaches back, grabbing the jig and wiggling the hook free. He tosses the line back into the warm tropical water, as soon as it hits the water another fish takes it, stretching the line out bar taut. Excitement ripples through his body like electricity.

I dream about Papa often. I'm a grown man with a family of my own now, but in my dreams he is always young and vital, the way I remember him from our days fishing, not a wizened old man in a wheelchair. I sit in my office in a Seattle high-rise and look out the window. I stare past the Space Needle to the clear, blue water of Elliot Bay and remember Papa.

We're on the *Marine View*, standing in the cockpit, side by side, pulling albacore. The *Marine View* seems alive as she climbs the face of a swell, then surfs down its back side, occasionally bucking like a bronco. The steady rhythm of her little Ford diesel is her heart-beat.

It's a good school. They're biting as fast as we can pull them in; the jig poles bend back with the weight of a couple hundred pounds of tuna on each pole. Salt air tickles my nose. I feel the briny taste on my tongue and the warm breeze caresses my skin. We have a following sea; as the boat's stern drops into the trough and the sea rises behind us. I look up and see the rainbow colored fish streaking towards us over my head; then the wave passes under us, lifting the boat until Papa and I are standing on the edge of a watery cliff, looking down into the blue abyss beneath our feet.

The tuna is a fierce fighter. The line tears at my fingers as I haul it in hand over hand. When the fish is up to the boat Papa reaches down with a long handled gaff and hooks the fish in the gills. The sea passes beneath the boat, giving us a lift, and he heaves on the handle, flipping

the heavy fish over his shoulders onto the deck. Time after time the torpedo-shaped fish strain against my muscles; I hear the hum of the line as the albacore fight against it, the slap of the fishes' tails as they hit the deck.

Then I awaken. Lying in my cozy bed on a cold, dark winter morning, the wind howls through the trees outside my window. I luxuriate in the warmth of the dream. Having the chance to see Papa again, to spend a few precious moments at his side fills me with an inner glow. Over the years and distance, the bond that we built that summer still pulls me towards him. I feel him every time I pick up one of his tools, plot a course on a chart or take the helm of my boat. He is always walking beside me.

Tall and thin, Papa had pale blue eyes that could cut through you like a saber or twinkle with mischief. In my mind's eye I see him in an open collared work shirt, light blue dungarees, his sea boots rolled down. He wears his ever-present sailor's cap at what he called a "go to hell" angle, covering the neatly trimmed ring of white hair that encircles his bald head. One foot up on the bulwark, his fists on his hips he tosses his head back in a laugh. The memory reminds me of Errol Flynn playing Robin Hood, where he says "Welcome to Sherwood Forrest." I will always see Papa treading across the planet in his seven league boots.

Papa was a big strong Scotsman, I looked up to him like some Olympic god, throwing lightning bolts down at the mere mortals, laughing in the face of adversity. Everything he did was of heroic proportions.

I first went to sea with Papa in 1959, shortly after my eighth birthday.

"You're getting old enough to go fishing now, Mijo," he told me. "When you get out of school this summer, you can come along on a fishing trip,"

Papa moored the *Marine View* on a float out in the middle of the harbor at Newport Beach, California, rather than at a dock or marina, it was much less expensive. To get to her, we had to put our skiff, which we named *Corky*, into the water and row out. I worried about the *Marine View* being moored out in the harbor. I was afraid she'd be lonely, away from the other boats.

During that winter we built *Corky*, an eight foot plywood pram, to use as our shore boat. She was built mostly out of marine plywood We worked in the carport of our house in Costa Mesa.

“Hold the sheet of plywood for me, Mijo, and watch your hands.” Papa and I lifted the clean, sweet-smelling sheet of half inch marine plywood onto two saw horses. Using full-sized plans printed on tissue paper, he traced the shapes onto the plywood I held the sheet steady while he cut the pieces out with his saber-saw. It was loud and noisy and I ended up covered in sawdust, but I loved it. I was working with my father and I could see the boat take shape, come to life.

“OK, now you can start sanding,” Papa told me when we had the major components cut out. “Start with a medium grit and when you get it good and smooth, switch to a fine grit.” I spent hours with a sheet of sandpaper wrapped around a block of wood smoothing the plywood until it was like a baby's bottom. In the meantime, Papa cut out the frames. It was ready to be assembled

“We're going to glue the pieces together with Weldwood Glue.” Papa carefully measured the powdered glue out of the little orange can and mixed it with the prescribed amount of water, stirring it with a little stick.

“Why can't we just nail it together? It'll be faster.”

“We want this boat to last. You have to be patient and do it right.”

So we clamped the sides and the ends onto the skiff with Papa’s long bar clamps, adding one piece at a time. I just wanted to be done and to go play with it.

After what seemed like a lifetime of sanding, shaping, and gluing we added the final touch: a coat of paint. The hull was buff like the masts on an old sailing ship, the gunnels and seats bright white. Brass oar locks completed her traditional look.

Putting the back seat down on the 1953 Ford station wagon we slid *Corky* into the back. She stuck out the rear, so we tied her down and put on a red flag. When we got to the beach, we carried the skiff from the parking lot to the water. It was about one hundred yards, but carrying a boat through beach sand, it seemed like miles.

Even though I was only eight years old, I always held up my end of the skiff. I was big and strong for my age and it was a matter of pride that I never dropped her no matter how much I thought my arms were going to come out of their sockets, I couldn’t let Papa down.

Once we got the skiff to the water, we made trips back and forth to the car to bring our tools, supplies and other assorted items that we needed to ferry out to the boat. When the skiff was loaded, I climbed onto the center seat and Papa shoved us off into the water.

He taught me to row a boat. He sat in the back seat and held out his hand vertically in front of him.

“Don’t look over your shoulder, you don’t need to see where you’re going. Look at my hand, I’ll tell you where to go.” If he pointed his hand to my left, I needed to steer the skiff to the left; if he pointed it to my right, I steered to the right.

I got really good at rowing the skiff. I learned to row with both oars and steer by rowing with only one oar at a time, to rotate the oars with one oar in the water at a time, to row

backwards and forwards. I learned to pick out a mark on shore directly behind the boat to use to keep my course straight.

As spring approached I was in a whirl of excitement. I didn't even pay attention to baseball and spring training that year; I was so worked up about going fishing.

May came, and Papa spent all of his spare time working on the *Marine View*. I helped him on weekends, but missed most of the work because I was in school.

The *Marine View* was a working boat. She wasn't one of those racy young things that dashed about the harbor, but a solid, beamy old girl designed to last a lifetime of hard work. Papa used to tell me that when he was growing up, his mother told him, "Son, when you get ready to get married, you find yourself a Texas girl. No matter how bad things get, she's already seen worse." The *Marine View* was a Texas girl.

Thirty-six feet long, her hull and deck house were painted white, her decks and trim were buff colored. Her bulwarks were tan with dark brown cap rails. She had a tall buff colored mast that was painted white at the top with jig poles on either side. Her foredeck was raised and aft of the small deck house was her fish hold hatch cover and aft of that, the engine room hatch cover.

Papa moved the *Marine View* to the public dock to prepare for the upcoming tuna season. He realized that he needed a deck hand because he wasn't planning on my being much help. As usual, he didn't want to have to pay full shares. At eight years old, I did not understand how hard the times were, but while Papa was working on the boat, getting ready to go fishing, a steady stream of fishermen walked up him and hailed him from the dock. It seemed like everyone was looking for a berth (job).

"Say, Cap, you goin' after albacore?"

“Yep, they should be off of Cedros Island in a couple of weeks.”

“You need a deck hand?”

“You have any experience?”

“Yeah, I been two seasons on the *Lucky Strike* with Portagee John and three seasons with Bob on the *Sea King*.”

“You need a full share then. I don’t have any positions for a full share man.”

In the fishing fleet when the catch was brought into port and sold it was divided by the time-honored share system. Half the income went to the boat. Two shares went to the captain because he ran the boat and found the fish. The cook got a share and a half because, in addition to working as a fish puller, he had the additional responsibilities of getting up before everyone else and fixing breakfast, cooking all meals and keeping the galley clean (or as close to clean as you can get on a fishing boat). If the boat had an engineer, he would get a share and a half. That left the deck hands with one share a piece. If it was a large boat and there were rookies on board, they might get a half share or a third share since they were learning their trade.

The proceeds of the catch would be divided by however many shares there were on the boat and paid out in cash. A large boat with a big crew would have more shares to pay out, but because it could hold a larger catch, it could mean a bigger payday for each man.

June arrived and Papa was ready to go fishing, but I was still in school. He started getting reports of albacore off of Baja California and couldn’t wait. As was his usual habit, he hired an inexperienced deck hand who knew nothing about fishing. They made a couple of trips with mediocre results.

Then school was out. I was free to go fishing at last. On my first trip Papa took Tom, the green deck hand, with us. Papa had one berth, Tom had the other and I slept on a shelf at the bow of the boat with a cut-down mattress. I was in heaven.

“You read the compass here,” Papa told me as he pointed to the little arrow on the box compass. I wasn’t tall enough to see over the dash board so Papa had a milk crate for me to stand on. “I’ll give you a course, say two hundred seventy degrees, and you need to keep the boat going that way. If you start to swing to port, give her a little starboard rudder. If you start to swing to starboard, give her a little port rudder.” He stood beside me with his hand on my shoulder. I stood on the old wooden milk crate staring intently at the compass, paying no attention to the world outside. At first, I cut a zigzag course across the ocean as I made big corrections, then went off course the other way. Eventually, I cut down my corrections and learned to anticipate the boat coming back on her heading. I was holding my course, but could have been running into anything. Finally, as I learned to steer the boat, Papa told me that I took to the sea like I was born to it. I guess, in a way, I was.

Tying knots was imperative. Many times a seaman’s life and those of his shipmates might depend upon his ability to tie a knot that would hold or one that could just as easily be untied

“This is a square knot,” Papa instructed “It’s one of the most useful knots. You use it to tie two pieces of line together. You have to be careful though. If you don’t get it right, you’ll have a granny knot. It looks a lot like a square knot, but won’t hold worth a damn. Now look at this, you go right over left, then left over right.” He slowly patiently taught me the fine art of knot tying. I soon mastered the square knot, then the bowline, used to attach lines to some fixed object, and the clove hitch, used to tie the boat to a bollard

Next he taught me how to splice and seize lines. Splicing two lines together was a much more permanent solution than tying them with a knot. Splicing involves unraveling a length of the line, then braiding the unraveled length back into the line to form a loop or intertwining it with another line. Sometimes you needed to join two lines together, sometimes you needed to put a permanent loop in the end of the line or maybe fasten the line around a thimble. Everything was new and exciting for me.

Seizing was used to protect the ends of the line from unraveling. Papa showed me how to take small twine and wrap it around the end of a line or over a splice and pass it back through itself so that it wouldn't come loose. When we were done seizing the line, he dipped it into a can of varnish to make the end hard.

I think Papa was vicariously experiencing fishing for the first time again through my eyes. As the boat left the protection of the Newport Beach jetty, we encountered a large swell. The boat rode up over the top of the swell, then slid down into the trough. This was repeated time after time, hundreds of times an hour, day after day. It became as normal as the floor of the house being fixed and unmoving.

“You know, I'd never have a thirty-eight foot boat,” Jim told us as we ran south.

“Why not, Tom?” Papa asked

“Because the seas are exactly thirty-eight feet apart. A thirty-eight footer will get hung up with the bow on one wave and the stern on another. That's how they break their backs.”

“Where the hell did you hear that cock-and-bull story?” Papa asked

“I was listening to a couple of old fishermen in the tavern just before we left.”

Papa roared in laughter.

“Did you ever go snipe hunting when you were a kid?”

“Yeah, we were on a camping trip and my uncle told us we were going snipe hunting. He gave each of us a gunny sack, a flash light and a stick. He told us we were supposed to catch the snipes sleeping on the ground and beat them over the head with the stick.”

“Did you catch any?”

“Of course not. There’s no such thing as snipes. He was just hazing us on our first camping trip. Oh . . .” Jim’s mouth hung open, his face flushed red “I guess they got me, huh?”

While Papa and Tom were busy fishing or handling the boat, much of my time was spent playing pretend games. The companion way ladder between the deck house and the fo’c’sle (the living quarters in the front part of the boat) was the perfect place for me to make a desperate last stand against boarding pirates. I could climb the rat lines to the top of the mast and look out for new lands to discover. I would stand in the bow, holding on to the forestay and be on the forepeak of a Viking long ship. We had seen the Tony Curtis movie *The Vikings* the year before and I was fascinated with Vikings.

The sump in the fish hold was the lowest point on the boat. Papa poured a ton of concrete into the bottom of the boat for ballast when he built her. He left a square box about eighteen inches across at the aft end of the fish hold to collect any water that accumulated in the boat. In the sump was a powerful bilge pump that sucked the water up and sent it overboard

I listened to Papa and his fishing friends talking about the tides since I was little. I hadn’t figured out what was so important about tides yet, but I knew they were important. Why else would they be such a frequent topic of discussion?

Often, when I didn’t have anything else to do, I slid the fish hold hatch cover open, climbed down into the hold and checked the sump. I convinced myself that I could tell the state

of the tides by the amount of water in the sump. If the sump was empty, we would be on an ebb tide (low tide), if the sump was full, it was a flood tide (high tide) and if it was really full, then it must be a spring tide (the highest tides of all). Of course, when hundreds of miles out to sea, the tides had no impact on our boat or our fishing.

“Shark!” Tom yelled Looking in the direction he was pointing I saw a dark gray fin cutting through the water parallel to our course. “It’s a big one.”

“He’s pacing us, waiting to steal our fish.” Papa appeared from out of nowhere with his old British Enfield rifle in hand The rifle was war surplus, from World War I.

After spending his boyhood in frontier Texas and eight years in the Army, Papa was an expert with firearms. The ancient Enfield had an adjustable rear sight. When you were shooting at a close-up target, you left the sight down and lined up the bead on the front of the barrel with the notch on the rear of the rifle. But the Enfield had a range of almost three miles. To aim at a distant target, you had to take the pull of gravity into account. To solve this problem, the sight assembly flipped up for a distant target. It was calibrated on the left side by the hundreds of yards. On the right side of the assembly there was a little dial that you used to move the notch up and down until you had it at the appropriate distance marker. This caused the barrel to be tilted up when you sighted it in and compensated for the effect of gravity as the bullet traveled through the air.

Papa quickly, efficiently, raised the rear sight and dialed it in for the estimated distance, chambered a round and put the heavy rifle to his shoulder.

A loud explosion rent the air. The recoil from the huge rifle was so strong that Papa’s shoulder was kicked back a good six inches.

A white spout of water erupted just this side of the fin. The shark arched in the air, a red trail behind it, pieces of flesh flying in the air. The great beast rolled over in the water.

“Watch this,” Papa said

In a matter of minutes we spotted another shark fin, then another, then another. Soon the surface of the sea was covered with them. The water boiled, arriving sharks swirled around the dead beast, grabbing great chunks out of its flesh, fighting and biting at each other in their frenzy to get at the food

“That’ll take care of the bastards,” Papa told me. “The sharks’ll be so busy eating the one I shot that they’ll fall behind our school. Sharks can smell blood in the water. They have one of the most highly developed senses of smell of all fish. When they smell the blood, they get excited and go crazy.”

Among Papa’s many talents was predicting the weather. He could look at the sky, the moon, the stars and tell what the weather was going to be tomorrow. He would look at the swell on the ocean and start battening down the hatches.

“We’re in for a blow,” he’d say, or “Gonna have a nice day tomorrow.”

I never understood what he saw or how he knew it, but he was never wrong.

When the fish were biting, it was my job to operate the boat and Papa and Tom pulled the fish. At night Papa cooked dinner, but I always cleaned up the galley. I was used to washing the dishes at home with my sister, Quita, so it was no big deal.

One of my favorite jobs was stacking and icing down the big fish. I probably weighed eighty or ninety pounds. The fish averaged from twenty to thirty pounds so it was a struggle, but

I always managed to wrestle them to the right bins. Then I got to ice them down. We had a big, flat shovel, much like a snow shovel, that I used to shovel ice over them. It was so hot on deck that it felt good to be working in the freezing fish hold, besides it was more fun than scrubbing down the decks to get rid of all the fish scales and blood

We didn't get rich that trip, but we caught enough fish to pay our expenses. At the end of the trip Papa paid Tom off and told him he wasn't needed anymore.

I swelled with pride when Papa told me "You were a lot more use to me than Jim. From now on it will just be the two of us." I felt like I had just passed into manhood