

The Life

Men and women describe the life of commercial fishing

We are pleased to present an opportunity for those involved in commercial fishing in the Pacific to describe the way they work, the way they live. If you have a story to tell, send it to editor@pacificfishing.com.



Not the Hekla, but a trawler covered with ice -- this time seeking refuge in Dutch Harbor in 2007.

Ice

Mix it with the Gulf of Alaska, and it just may save your life

By Jerry Tilley

Jerry Tilley was born in the fishing village of Tokeland, Wash., in 1931, and has lived the life of the sea and fishing. One of the most memorable — and frightening — interludes came aboard the F/V Hekla off Alaska in 1962.

November in and around Kodiak Island, Alaska, is windy, wet, and, at times, very cold — snow falls sideways. And that's under normal conditions. Wind velocity was clocked at 128 m.p.h. at the U.S. Naval Air Station in November 1962. Chill factors were off the scale. But those who have to go fishing to pay the bills are not worrying about a chill factor. As a matter of fact, I'm not too certain that back in 1962 anyone knew what a chill factor was. I had never heard of it.

I was a deckhand on an 80-foot, house-forward, wooden shrimp-fishing boat named Hekla. It was not a well-maintained vessel, as far as the mechanical functions were concerned, but the living area was tolerable and reasonably clean.

The *Hekla* was owned and captained by an Icelander who had no fear of the sea, cold, rain, wind, ice, King Neptune, Davy Jones, or the Norse God Odin. Our crew consisted of Captain (he insisted on being called Captain) Magnus Magnusson, Johnny Martin (the Captain's friend from Bellingham, Wash.), Skip Greene, and me, Jerry Tilley. Skip and I, the last man aboard, were Kodiak residents.

Skip and I spent some time in the engine room, and a thought crossed my mind that if anything required lubrication, all we would have to do was start the main engines (dual 6-71 diesels) and close the hatch for a few minutes, and everything in the engine room would be oiled. The floorboards and bulkheads — and everything else — were saturated with oil. We attempted to clean it to a point but then decided it was hopeless in the allotted time. We gathered some cardboard boxes from the grocery store and cut them up to cover the floorboard sections so we wouldn't track oil up to the galley and through the rest of the boat. This course of action seemed to be a good idea at the time. It even improved the looks of the engine room.

When it was time to go fishing, we left our calm moorage in the boat harbor at Kodiak, moved under a cannery's ice chute, and sprayed about a 10-inch-deep layer of flake ice on the fish-hold bottom. We then filled the square of the hatch to the top of the bin boards. We sealed the hatch and secured the deck for travel.



Jerry Tilley in the 1950s.

Skip was the cook because he was the only one on board who could cook on the oil-fired range without burning the food and the galley to a crisp. The Captain always bought the groceries for the trip because he took part of the larder home to feed his wife and himself, taking the total cost out of the crew share. We were a little slow on the realization that we were paying for a helluva lot more than we were eating. There was usually just enough food for the trip and no extras.

After the fourth or fifth meal of chicken, regardless of how it was prepared, we were ready for a change. The Captain would cook us up one of his specialties, which consisted of a fresh cod cleaned and the flesh rolled up into little round balls. This was what he called Norskies Cod Balls. Properly cooked they were not too bad. Unfortunately, properly cooked cod balls were rare, because the Captain would prepare them, put them on the stove, and then go up in the wheelhouse and fall asleep.

We would be working on deck — sorting, washing, and icing the shrimp into the fish hold — and look up to see black smoke billowing like a volcano eruption from the galley door. Skip would go in and grab the pot and throw the round chunks of cod charcoal overboard. Then we would eat a chicken sandwich.

We left Kodiak harbor heading southwest to the fishing area through Sitkalidak Straits. It's about 100 miles to the Two Headed Island grounds where we fished.

We arrived near the fishing area and anchored among the other shrimp boats in Jap Bay. The weather was about normal for the area and November. There was a big swell and some wind chop, just enough for me to lose the

last three meals consumed on flat ground. I always gorged myself when in town because I knew there was no chance of anything staying down once we started jumping the wave crest and diving to the bottom of the trough with crashing walls of green water inundating the entire vessel. There were times — few that I recall — when we had a smooth sailing to or from the fishing grounds. After all, this was November in the Gulf of Alaska.

We usually fished for three days and then turned the pointy end of the boat towards Seward, Alaska, where our market was located. This required a run a little south of and across the Barren Islands and the Gulf of Alaska into Resurrection Bay, located on the mainland.

Cook Inlet, when in the ebb (tide going out), flows into the Gulf of Alaska, and it roars past the Barren Islands. When the wind is from the south or western quadrant and Cook Inlet ebbs, this area of the Gulf can be extremely treacherous. (Believe it or not, this is an understatement.)

We fished all day in nasty weather. The old Hekla managed to stay on top of the swells.

would let us know this was not going to be a nice day to be sliding across the deck, trying to lasso a net full of shrimp. Our Captain paid no attention to our comments about the weather, the wind, the swells, or any other lame excuse we could think of prior to hauling the anchor. The anchor came up unencumbered, just like it was designed to do when the winch was engaged. We had hoped it would be hung up on a rock or the Titanic.

We mentioned the fact that none of the other boats had hauled anchor or left the protection of the secluded bay. The Captain had selective hearing.

We fished all day in nasty weather. The old *Hekla* managed to stay on top of the swells. The boat was rolling, and the Captain was supposed to try to hold the boat into the swell while we were trying to haul the shrimp aboard. The shrimp bags (cod end) came aboard with a swing that arced from the hauling rail, all the way across the deck, to the other rail and beyond. When that bag came aboard, someone had to grab the puckering string to empty the contents, but you had to do it so the shrimp dropped on the wood grated deck that served as our sorting table. This required timing and luck. There were times when the bag's puckering string was jerked and the bag sailed out over the opposite rail to dump all the contents back into the sea.

We managed to catch about 20 tons from daylight to dark, then we headed back in to anchor up for the night. Not one of the boats had left the bay. We worked most of the night sorting, washing, and icing the shrimp from the last tow. The temperature was close to freezing, my fingers were numb, and my nose was raw from wiping away the drips with my icy gloves. At night, when I was on deck sorting and washing the shrimp from the day's catch, all I think about was how good the sack was going to feel when I finally crawled into its inviting warmth. The wind was still howlin' when we hit the sack.

Another day arrived, in spite of the need for more sleep and staying warm. The wind had not abated; as a matter of fact, it had increased in velocity even though we were in a protected bay.

Our morning whining and complaining about the conditions we were about to encounter had absolutely no effect on our Icelander Captain. According to Captain Magnusson, weather reports were never correct anyhow. He always said, "If you want weather reports, start the mains and haul the anchor." We did just that.

We fished another day in the same nasty conditions as the previous day, returning at night to the protected waters of the bay where all the other boats remained at anchor. Not one of them ventured out into the turbulence

In Jap Bay, we rolled out of our bunks a couple of hours before daylight so that we could eat breakfast, don the proper attire, and get the gear ready to fish. The wind was causing the rigging to sing and snap with an occasional gust that

Mother Nature had conjured.

The third and final day was one we always looked forward to because we could rest on the way to Seward. However, this day was no better, and the wind had not reduced its velocity. The riggin' was still screaming, the temperature was dropping, and our cries of forced labor and undue hardship in the face of Mother Nature's wrath went unheeded. The Captain's hearing had not improved. At breakfast the Captain made the statement, "I can't understand why these other boats don't get out there and fish." We knew the answer to that. None of them were born and raised on a boat in Iceland that fished the North Atlantic.

Up anchor and out to the grounds in big rolling sea and fierce winds. We managed to haul in another big catch for the day with extreme difficulty, as the wind and swell had picked up considerably. We sorted and washed the shrimp, then iced it in the hold. We always iced our shrimp heavy, more so than the boats that had a market in Kodiak. They only had a five hour run to unload. We had to travel across the Gulf of Alaska to Seward and, depending on weather, this trip could stretch out to 18 to 24 hours.

Daylight had left and the darkness covered the violence of the sea. My watch was first, and all I wanted to do was hang my head over the rail and unload the last of my final intake of food. I looked out through the portholes, and all I see was white combers and green water crashing into and over the wheelhouse. I had to cut the throttles back to about three-quarter speed. **Daylight had left and the darkness covered the violence of the sea.** Our portholes were the only reason there was no water in the wheelhouse. The glass was one-half-inch thick, and each porthole was only 12 inches in diameter. If we had had regular wheelhouse windows, they would have been blasted out long ago. We had no flood lights, so I couldn't see what was coming. I just tried to maintain the compass course. The wind had increased considerably, as if it weren't far too severe before. The seas were building, and as the boat was climbing up a crest and the crest broke over the top, we dropped to the bottom with a shudder that felt like the boat was shaking off the water like a dog.

Unfortunately, our course had to change; otherwise, we were broadside to the sea. This condition continued throughout my three hour watch, but now there was ice forming on the portholes. The temperature was dropping and, as my watch ended, I got Skip to come and relieve me. After our watch we had to check the engine room before crawling into our bunks I checked it out and all appeared to be OK.

I wedged myself into my bunk and tried to stay in it, but sleep was out of the question. The Captain may have been sleeping, but I doubt it. Skip was on watch and hanging on to the wooden steering wheel. Johnny was in the galley hanging on to the table. The marine radio was on, and the U.S. Naval Air Station in Kodiak had just stated that the wind speed had reached 128 m.p.h. This was going to be a long night, I thought to myself.

The portholes in the wheelhouse were now frozen over with ice, and just above the screaming wind and crashing seas we heard something tear loose from the top of the wheelhouse. We didn't know if it was chunks of ice or part of the boat. The radar quit working, so we thought the radar antenna had parted company with the boat. The glass shield on the flying bridge was gone and had been replaced by accumulating ice. The radio antenna had broken off because we no longer had radio communications. Our wind gauge pegged out at the max and evidently went with the wind. It only went to a 100 mph anyway.

We looked out the back door leading from the galley and saw the ice attaching itself to the railing and the drag door stanchions. The rails had accumulated about a foot of ice so far.

Skip finished his watch and the Captain took the wheel. Skip opened the hatch to the engine room to check it out. He discovered that the sea was also on the inside of the boat, rising rapidly and sloshing up to the main

engines. He and I jumped down to see why the automatic bilge pump wasn't working and why the bilge alarm hadn't screeched out a warning.

Our attempt at covering the floor boards with cardboard to keep the oil in the engine room and not all over the upper decks had backfired. The water had dissolved the cardboard, washing it off the deck plates and into the bilge, and the pumps had sucked up the loose pieces and plugged the entire system. We couldn't get the pumps working, and the water was rising fast. We had to keep it from reaching the main engine intakes.

By now the water was coming in fast, and we saw the reason after a quick search. The boat was so heavily laden with ice that the dry seams that were normally above the water line were now below the waterline and leaking profusely. The severe pounding we were encountering had loosened the caulking in the seams and they were no longer watertight.

By now the water was sloshing to port and starboard, fore and aft and almost up to both main engine's oil fill pipes. I climbed up out of there and hollered to Johnny to get us some buckets, right now. I grabbed a bucket and dropped it down through the 24-inch square hatch to Skip. He scooped up a bucketful and reached up over his head, and I reached down and grabbed the bail of the bucket (handle) and hauled it up out of there with my right hand and handed it to Johnny.

I was on my knees, leaning down with one arm to grab the bucket and using the other arm to maintain balance, so I was lifting and reaching out with one arm to hand Johnny the bucket. (We had two 5-gallon buckets and one 3-gallon bucket. A gallon of water weighs 8.3 pounds, and the average weight of each bucket was probably somewhere between 20 and 30 pounds, depending on how much was left after Skip scooped it up and handed it up to me.) Johnny took a couple of steps and pitched it out the galley door.

The freezing seawater was just about up to Skip's knees when I asked him if he wanted me to spell him off. His typical non-verbal response was zero, and he just passed me another bucket and kept that up as fast as he could scoop them up and hand them to me, so the bucket brigade never slowed down.

Johnny said, "Hey Jerry, the deck gratings are gone and the ice is building around the wheel house." Actually, the ice was about 3 feet thick all around the boat. We were really sluggish in the rolls and pitching. We couldn't stop to chop ice because the water in the engine room was not going down fast enough.

Skip was still in water, now up over his knees. I couldn't believe a man could stand in freezing cold water for that long without some type of relief. I asked him again if I could spell him off and I received the same reply, zero. Another bucket slapped into my hand. This man is one tough guy or dead below his crotch, I thought.



Jerry Tilley is shown in a recent photo near the *Goldenrod* in the Bahamas. Jerry designed and rebuilt the vessel into a lobster catcher-processor for a company in Nassau.

The oil-fired galley range was not working. I think the wind blew the fire out. The ice was starting to creep in the galley doorway, freezing the spilled water from our bucket brigade. This made it difficult to step out far enough to throw the bucket of water, but I let Johnny worry about that. It didn't stop him.

'In this water we wouldn't stay alive long enough to realize we were already dead.'

minute. Bucket down, bucket out.

I was wondering what in the hell I was doing on this coffin of ice. Wondering was about all anyone could do at the time. There were no alternatives. I don't think there were 12 words spoken in the 12 hours that we bucketed water out of the engine room. We didn't stop for even a

We had about 65 tons of shrimp in the hold plus about 10 tons of flake ice. That kept us fairly low in the water. The ice that was forming all over the boat added more weight. If this boat had a wheelhouse above the foc'sle we most certainly would roll over. The top of the house was only about 5 feet above the aft deck and about 4 feet above the forward deck where the anchor winch was located. On top of the wheelhouse there was only an open flying bridge.

The ice was now solid from the bow stem to the top of the wheelhouse and along the rails. The ice outside the railings was so heavy, large sections would break off as we hit the bottom of the trough. We would drop 30 to 40 feet off the crest and crash to the bottom as another swell would slowly lift us up for the next one to drop us. The tops of the waves were blown flat from the wind.

We were being blown north close to the Barren Islands. The Cook Inlet ebb was causing massive swells that were without exaggeration 50 feet or more. Our 80 foot Hekla would climb a wave for what seemed like an eternity at a 45 degree angle and sometimes more than 45 degrees, then finally reach the top to cascade down the other side with the stern high in the air. At times we would drop over so fast the wheel would come out of the water and then down we would slide to the bottom of the trough. At times the swell would just break over us, and the boat would drop and hit with a bone-jarring crash. One of those sudden stops caused the battery racks to pull off the forward bulkhead and partially submerge under the seawater. They did remain in operation. A little luck was required here.

Skip was still passing the buckets without a minute's variation in the procedure. The Captain stayed on the wheel and never said one word. I guess everyone was deep in their own thoughts, wondering if we were going to join the others before us beneath the surface of the sea in Davy Jones' locker or stay on the surface.

We knew we had no radio or radar so there was no way to call anyone. It wouldn't have done us any good anyway. No planes were going to fly and no vessel of any description was crazy enough to put to sea in this weather. I suppose the adrenalin kept us going, that and the fact that we did not have a life raft. We did have what is referred to as life vests. The life vests were probably purchased at some military surplus store. They looked like WWII vintage. I wouldn't call them life preservers because all they could possibly be good for is maybe they would keep your body afloat long enough for someone to find the frozen remains. In this water we wouldn't stay alive long enough to realize we were already dead.

Daylight found us north of Marmot Island. All we knew was, we could see land out the galley door. The Captain had to come out there to see where we were. We had to holler to him on where to steer the boat to an acceptable anchorage as the wheelhouse windows were solid ice and not the kind you can see through. Our spirits lifted considerably. Captain Magnusson managed to maneuver the boat into a cove out of the giant seas and with some protection from the wind.

We couldn't stop the bucket brigade yet so we continued our bailing efforts. At precisely 12 hours of non-stop bailing with buckets, we managed to get the water level down below the oil pans of the mains. We ventured out on deck to see what looked like an iceberg with a mast and two stanchions with drag doors tightly secured and covered with ice. The rest of the deck was clean, and the hatch covers were still in place. No water entered the hold. This was a real stroke of luck.

With daylight came some relief from the cold. At least we were not making ice.

We were very happy to be alive. Skip was soaking wet and should have been dead or frozen from the crotch down. He was a born Alaskan, though, and he was tough.

Adrenalin kept us going. We were very aware that if we stopped bailing with the buckets, the sea water would cover the engines, and that would be a sad moment because then we wouldn't be able to keep the bow into the sea and the lights would go out and then we knew what was next. Cold and wet.

Our next move was to try and get the anchor down. We couldn't even get to the anchor or forward around the wheelhouse as it was solid ice. The alternative was to get the drag doors broken loose and drop them to the bottom and hope they held us in place until we could get rid of some of the ice and survey the damage.

After about an hour we managed to break the doors loose and drop them to the bottom. We waited for a while before patting ourselves on the back in case the doors wouldn't hold us in place.

We determined that the reason we didn't roll over and sink was the thickness of the ice outside the hull, the weight of the water in the engine room, and the weight of the shrimp catch in the main hold. We actually maintained a fairly even keel but realized that when the boat rolled, the ice on the outside of the railings and hull kept the boat from rolling the rails under. Ice floats, and that's a good thing. Lots of spray over the boat and some of our half-inch cables hanging from the riggin' were 24 inches in diameter. The equipment on the top of the house was gone, as well as the antennas and wind screen on the flying bridge.

Unbeknownst to us we were listed as lost at sea.

We managed to get the stove working, but the only thing left to eat was a packaged cake mix. We baked it and ate it right out of the pan. There was nothing else to eat. Our thrifty shopper Captain never bought more than a trip's worth of groceries. If not for the 20 plus hours of no gain travel, we would have been in Seward eating something besides chicken and cod balls. We still had to get across the Gulf to Seward to unload our shrimp.

After an inspection of the hold we were gratified to see the shrimp still well-iced and no seepage through the hatch covers. The temperature kept the ice from melting in the hold, as well as the top of the boat. We retrieved a couple of buckets of shrimp from the hold and boiled them on the stove. We had us a genuine, old-fashioned shrimp feed. We even let the Captain have some.

We started chopping ice but came to the conclusion that the boat was steady in place and the wind had momentarily died down. We were exhausted. We hit the bunks for a few hours before we continued our attack on the remaining ice. The temperature had warmed to a point that caused the ice to drop off the railings and the hull, so we charged forward to remove the ice from the front of the wheelhouse, the anchor, and the anchor winch.

We hauled our drag doors up and secured them to the stanchions. The mains were running, the pumps were repaired, the batteries were back in place, and the cardboard that we could gather up was deposited in the sea, oil slick and all. Then we departed for Seward on the sixth day out of Kodiak Harbor.

We had to get across the Barren Islands to Rocky Pass on the mainland while the weather and tide was more or less in our favor. We arrived about 12 hours later, just before another screaming southwester hit the area. We had to drop anchor and wait it out because no one, not even our illustrious, fearless Captain Magnusson, would tempt this pass in the dark.

We were very fortunate that the anchor held. We ate more shrimp, smoked cigarettes, and drank coffee. Daylight



The Hekla is shown after her final voyage, cast ashore in Kodiak following the 1964 Alaska earthquake.

arrived right on time, about 0930 hours. We went forward to haul the anchor. It didn't want to leave just yet. It was hung up, and we were certain it wasn't the Titanic. We backed 'er down and pulled around, forward, reverse, let out cable, hauled in cable, and finally, after the Captain made the final call, we chopped the cable off, said a few kind words to our only anchor and chain, and then waved goodbye. Now we were at the mercy of the Gods, for we had no anchor and a questionable bilge-pumping system and a fearless Captain.

were calling the *Hekla* there was no answer. The boats that were still anchored in the bay from where we left were aware of our departure date. Unbeknownst to us we were listed as lost at sea.

Day seven and back out into the nasty weather trying to get to Seward. We had no communications with anyone, so if they

We finally arrived in Seward on the morning of the eighth day out of Kodiak. We pulled up to the dock and tied up. We still had some remnants left over from the storm and some ice hanging here and there. The dock crew was in shock when they saw us. They told us we were listed as lost at sea. We agreed with them, we were lost at sea, but we never thought about leaving the boat. As I said before, "What was the alternative?"

We hammered the blocks out of the hatch angle irons that kept the canvas cover in place, removed the hatch covers, and dropped down into the hold to see if the shrimp were still a saleable product. Under normal conditions, five days would be a maximum time that you would be able to keep shrimp, providing it was properly iced. We were extremely lucky on this trip. The shrimp were in great condition. The cold temperatures had maintained the desired requirement for good product. It was as if we had a refrigerated hold.

As the dock crew proceeded to offload the shrimp, Skip, Johnny, and I headed for the nearest restaurant to attempt to fill the void in our stomachs. The Captain was probably calling his wife in Kodiak to tell her we were delayed by inclement weather and to order more chicken. He was the only man aboard who had a wife. Skip, Johnny, and I didn't even have a girlfriend.

The return trip to Kodiak after the offload was not much better. It was so cold in Seward that the water in Resurrection Bay was smokin'. When the water temperature is warmer than the air, fog rises and it looks like the water is smoking.

Kodiak is normally warmer than Seward, so by the time we returned to Kodiak, all the ice was gone.

People we met were shocked to see us as they read in the local paper that we were lost at sea.

Why did we return to the boat for the next trip? Adventure, living on the edge, adrenalin rush, chicken diet, who knows? We do know at this point in time it certainly wasn't the big bucks or the meals of those cod balls or the chicken epicurean delights. I reckon we obviously had no clue. It is just something you accept when your living is made on the sea.

Jerry Tilley's father was a fisherman, and the family moved to Westport where his dad built a small cannery. Jerry grew up in that cannery before child labor laws were invented. He first went to Alaska in 1953 to work in a cannery, then on a crab boat fishing Hecta Straits. He fished out of Westport during the winter months and back to Alaska. He probably is best known in the fishing community as a designer and operator of processing facilities.

Jerry is now retired on the Washington Coast. His son, Jerry Tilley Jr., is a third-generation fisherman. Jerry Jr., also known as Corky, fishes the king crabber Aleutian Ballad, which has been shown on Discovery Channel's Deadliest Catch. His son Matt and daughter fish with him.