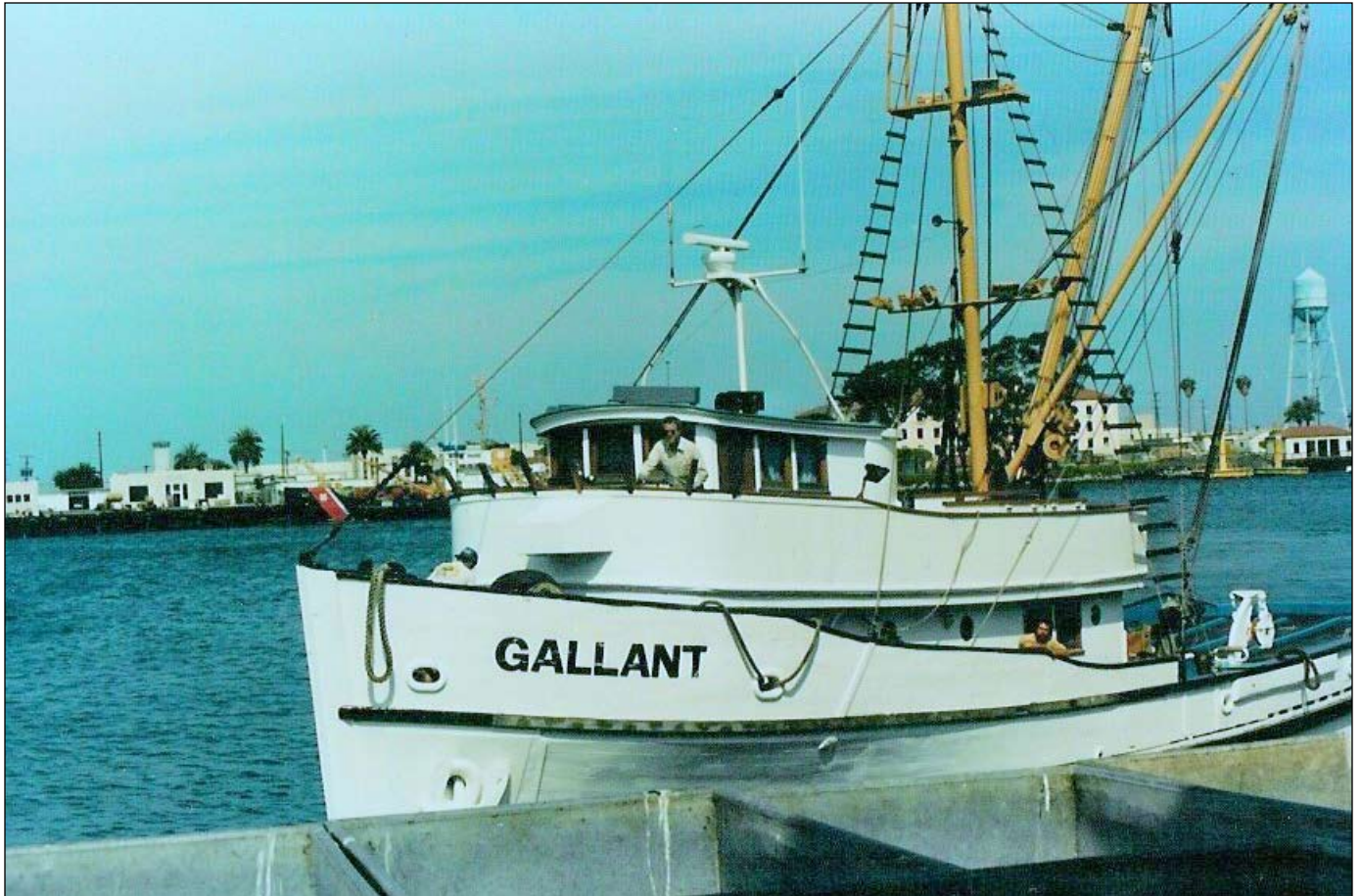


# The Life

## 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](mailto:editor@pacificfishing.com).



Steve Vilicich -- jack-of-all trades, including helping all manner of folks who really needed to be helped -- is shown aboard his *Gallant*, which fished out of San Pedro.

## For the Love of Steve

By Tom Giacalone

**Sometimes the best way to say thank you is to help someone else**

*Tom Giacalone is from a fishing family with its origins in Sicily. He is a chief engineer who has worked from the tropics to the Arctic and on harpoon boats to factory trawlers. His first steps in the industry were guided not only by his father but by a San Pedro troubleshooter who took him under his wing. Steve Vilicich was a mechanical engineer, fisherman and doctor of reflexology who was dedicated to his family, his church, his work, and anyone who needed guidance, machinery repairs or a friend.*

**I**t must have been the summer of '83. The only way I can link a boat I've worked to its particular time frame is to connect it with a life event and vice versa. I signed on the *Sea Queen* for three reasons: I had recently married and wanted to fish locally out of San Pedro. Laura was expecting our first son and the owners provided insurance that covered pregnancy. The *Sea Queen* was a good boat but mackerel was a destitute

fishery, so between unemployment checks, health insurance, and maybe a few fish, I was hoping to keep up with the bills.

**W**e were drifting for a couple hours at the end of a fishless night, hoping for better luck in the morning. The other boats had all caught their cannery imposed limits of mackerel and had long since departed, surely offloaded, and the crews were no doubt snuggled up at home, dreaming about the one that got away – maybe a fish maybe a girl. Seems like we spend our lives chasing one or the other.

I was in the weary stage of my watch and looking forward to a morning nap. The sky was just starting to show the colors of daybreak when I saw a few baitfish flipping around the boat. That roused me to notice the birds circling overhead, clearly interested in some happenings that only they could see beneath the surface of the water. I had been around enough of this action in my career to realize that something good could come of it and decided to wake the skipper up.

**‘This temporary crew wasn’t expecting to make much money. They just needed to get out of the house as well as gather material for some fresh bullshit to liven the morning sessions.’**

“Pete, get up. Something’s gonna pop out here.” To which he answered: “Tommy, wadda you doin’, thisa no the Southu Pacificu.” (On my last boat fishing tuna in New Guinea, we started the day early. I was sent there for two years by my

mentor Steve Vilicich who thought I needed the experience. That’s another story.) Embarrassed for disturbing the skipper’s sleep, I went back outside to finish my watch, but within minutes Pete was on the bridge, silently sipping coffee and studying the signs.

The sky grew brighter red as the sun prepared for its daily routine, and the activity around me increased at the same quick pace as the approaching dawn. The birds began to shriek and dive on the bait that was now breaking the surface all around the boat.

Then it happened: The sun broke the horizon and the ocean literally exploded. A huge school of albacore was suddenly boiling right next to the boat, pushing the bait to the surface, where the seabirds were in a panic, screaming and eating and fighting and arguing with each other and the albacore as they tried to get their share.

**I** was screaming too as I ran through the boat calling the crew. “Get up! Let’s go...tuna”! Pete yelled after me, “Tommy, starta the engine!” “That’s where I’m goin’,” I hollered back as the crew stumbled out of their bunks and into their boots.

Most of the regular crew had gone up to Bristol Bay to throw the dice on salmon, so some of the retired Dagos left their cumparis on the fish market dock behind and came to fill the empty bunks for a couple of months. This temporary crew wasn’t expecting to make much money. They just needed to get out of the house as well as gather material for some fresh bullshit to liven the morning sessions at Hy-C-Tane.

The parking lot was next to Hy-C-Tane, which was next to the ice house, and the ice house was next to the markets. So every morning there was a slow procession of old-timers making their way down the wharf. They’d stop frequently to hold court with whomever they encountered, maybe pick up a needle and sew a few meshes, dispense unsolicited wisdom on the critical issues of the day, and loudly catch about a million tons of fish between them before they made it as far as the markets.

**H**y-C-Tane was more than a fuel dock and meeting spot, it was Steve Vilicich’s shop, junkyard, and reflexology clinic, all crammed into an ancient tiny building that was littered inside and outside with the bones of past projects as well as the odds and ends necessary for ongoing reincarnations. The entire San Pedro fleet came to Steve with their mechanical problems. The man was a perfectionist in all crafts and could

also heal your aches and pains with reflexology massages on your hands and feet. Whenever Steve chanced upon a hurting fisherman, he'd sit him in his office chair, have him remove his shoes, then powder and massage pressure points on the guy's feet. When Steve first began this humanitarian act, word would go up and down the dock and in short order at least a dozen curious guys would be crowded around Steve and his victim joking and offering salacious advise about the best places to rub.

I worked for Steve before I started fishing and I worked for him when I was between boats. As a matter of fact, Steve hired a lot of guys who needed a day's work. He taught and coached me and he worked my ass off, Steve worked harder than anyone so I couldn't complain, but I did scream bloody murder almost everyday at beer-30 when some fisherman would walk into the shop, flap his arms frantically, and explain in a conglomeration of several languages how screwed up his boat was and how badly his children needed shoes. Steve never said no, and we'd end up working till 3 in the morning – or at least until his wife sent the kids down to the wharf to drag him home. Yeah, Hy-C-Tane was iconic, and Steve was a beacon of light for broken fishermen and broken boats.



Tom Giacalone, left, is shown with crewmate Jeff Foltman on the deck of the Jeanna Lynn in 1978. The vessel sank shortly after.

We set on that school of albacore and caught it. The crew called on the reserve strength that resides deep inside old men to put the last fish down the hatch. I was thinking about a paycheck that was worth 10 times a mackerel paycheck as I ran back up to the bridge to find Pete already on the wheel hoping against the odds for another school to show up. We grinned at each other as I picked up the glasses but didn't say much not wanting to jinx the day. I knew we were in for one hell of a summer when we immediately set on another boiler which loaded the boat.

**‘The sun broke the horizon and the ocean literally exploded. A huge school of albacore was suddenly boiling right next to the boat, pushing the bait to the surface, where the seabirds were in a panic, screaming and eating and fighting and arguing with each other and the albacore as they tried to get their share. ‘**

Well, that “mackerel season” turned out to be the greatest run of purse seine-caught albacore in history – which was the story on the dock, anyway. Thirty boats and a dozen spotter planes “got well,” but nobody did as good as the *Sea Queen*. I had the hunger that summer, not greed but an honest hunger to support a growing household. Yet, without Steve's benevolence and

aptitude, that season would have been a lot different.

Once, we had a problem with the winch and we needed a bearing. We called Steve on the radio and he asked what city we were closest to. We told him we could be in San Diego by midnight, and he said to have a taxi take me to the back porch of a certain shop and the bearing would be there in a paper bag. It was and I installed it on the way back to the fishing grounds, and we caught fish that same morning. The gearbox on the skiff engine also failed that summer. Steve had Mike Cooper, another Hy-C-Tane seasonal worker, remove the passenger seat from his car to accommodate a new gearbox in its place (the old truck was often in disrepair when Steve began devoting more time to foot treatments), deliver it to San Diego and help me install and test it; we caught fish the next morning.

Figure we have only about five minutes on this planet, and Steve spent much of his precious time ensuring that people were able to realize their dreams and opportunities. I needed that summer to happen as it did, but it's easy to forget that our successes are rarely achieved without support. Steve helped many people get through their seasons of life and living, but all he wanted for thanks was to see everyone do well.

As the years have gone by and my own Dago, Catholic upbringing prompted guilt for not paying Steve back. But, I realized I was returning his favors every time I did something as well as it could be done or by teaching someone in the manner he had taught me.



**After fishing across the Pacific, Tom Giacalone is shown today -- fishing Alaska.**

Boats and fisheries come and go, joy and adversity cycle in and out, and sometimes on those miserable, 1,000-day trips we spend too much time drifting into the past. But the past times we spent with Steve Vilicich helped define our futures.



**Steve Vilicich, shown in the setting best remembered in San Pedro: in front of the Hy-C-Tane.**

Hy-C-Tane is gone now, it shut down when Steve left to offer his virtues to Providence. Steve Vilicich and Hy-C-Tane were an integral part of the growth and success of the fishing industry and the men who worked it. Even though the legend will probably die with my generation, Steve's spirit will live on in all of the people he touched who in turn touched someone else.