In Memoriam: Captain Richard Thomas Ennis (1937-1990)

A giant of a man, second-generation commercial fisherman Richard Ennis embodied the heart and soul of the Morro Bay fishing community. His peers called him “the great fish finder.” Although it has been twenty years since Captain Ennis was lost at sea, this image evoked deep feelings and caused a number of seasoned mariners to pause and reflect on their loss.

Brothers Arnold, John and Ralph Ennis all began fishing on the Columbia River when still in their early teens. In the late 1940s, John Ennis moved with his family to Morro Bay. In 1950, John had the forty-six-foot steel boat Renabel built by William P. Johnson. In 1954, brother Arnold Ennis also moved his family to Morro Bay, bringing with him the forty-six-foot wooden Gladys E, built in 1951 by Adolph Lindstrom of Astoria. Arnold and John fished salmon in the spring and summer, from California to Oregon, and fished for albacore tuna in the summer and fall off the California coast and Mexico. Ralph, the youngest of the three, became a school teacher in Portland, but continued to fish on the Columbia whenever his schedule allowed.

Richard Thomas Ennis, the son of John and Beryl (Sphar) Ennis, was born in Astoria, Oregon, on July 10, 1937. After moving to Morro Bay, he attended Morro Bay Grade School and then graduated from San Luis Obispo High School in 1956. When still a youth, he began fishing with his father onboard the Renabel. Later, Richard bought his own boat, the wooden troller Viv, which had been built in Astoria in 1935. Eventually, Richard had the steel Viva built in Los Angeles. Although only documented at forty-seven feet long, the Viva was built to fish albacore, with large tanks that could be used to carry either live bait or extra fuel.

In In Search of the Albacore (2005), fellow tuna fisherman JoAnne Baade describes Richard as “a big guy ... shy and reticent ashore, but at the helm of his boat he projected confidence and authority.” Known to exercise “good judgment and steadiness,” Richard “never joined in futile arguments and
kept a sense of balance and good humor.” (p. 51) Another friend recalled Richard as: “a gentle soul and a good man.”

Richard was a founding director of today’s Morro Bay Commercial Fishermen’s Organization, incorporated in 1974, as well as one of the original shareholders of the Morro Bay Fuel Docks, incorporated in 1977. In addition, in 1975 Richard helped pioneer the South Pacific albacore troll fishery memorialized in JoAnne Baade’s book. Together with Keith Coburn of Hawai‘i, on the seventy-five foot Typhoon, and Jim Brandenburg from Morro Bay, on the wooden Jinita, using fuel subsidized by the Pacific Tuna Development Foundation and American Fishermen’s Research Foundation Richard ventured into the South Pacific on board the Viva, and managed to find commercial quantities of albacore tuna.

For the next fifteen years, the Viva was a regular presence in the South Pacific. The fleet grew from those first intrepid three to over thirty boats from ports all over the Pacific Coast. Other Morro Bay fishermen who participated included Wayne Smith on the Blue Belle, Merle Gerberding on the Billie Marie, Alton “Buck” Bailey, on the Norwester, and Mike Walsh on the Columbia; their boats averaged under sixty feet in length.

Typically the fleet would leave home in November and return to the coast mid-summer, fishing their way home via Oregon and delivering the last load to their home port or the cannery in San Pedro. The fishermen traveled in small groups, remaining in regular contact with each other through radios. To transit the broad expanses of ocean, holds were pumped full of fuel, then transferred to emptied fuel tanks and the holds cleaned at sea. To a large extent, the boats all had to be self sufficient, carrying spare parts and supplies to last an entire season. At times catches were unloaded at sea onto larger ships which then delivered the fish to the cannery.

On December 17, 1990, approximately nine hundred eighty miles southwest of San Diego, Richard and the Viva went down. According to JoAnne Baade:

“After a last minute, emergency overhaul of his main engine, Richard was hurrying to catch up in the South Pacific. Merle Gerberding with Billie Marie, his traveling
partner, picked up the crewman [Terry Groat]. It was rough weather and a rogue wave had caught the Viva and rolled her over. Richard yelled to his puller to get out, knowing he and his dog Samantha were trapped inside.” (p. 102)

Morro Bay’s fishing community, and the South Pacific fleet, were devastated.


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By Gardiner Harris
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A Morro Bay fisherman died Monday when his boat capsized in rough seas, trapping him underwater, according to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Richard Ennis, 54, was sailing for an albacore tuna fishing ground 1,000 miles south of Tahiti, according to his father. About 980 miles southwest of San Diego, Ennis awoke his only crew member, Terry Groat, and told him to abandon ship.

Groat made it off the ship. Ennis didn’t.

Groat, 26, of Crescent City, was rescued by an accompanying fishing vessel, the Billie Marie, owned and piloted by Merle Guberding of Morro Bay.

Ennis’ body was lost in the sunken wreckage of his ship, the Viva. Groat was not injured.

The Coast Guard is still investigating the cause of the sinking. Timothy Rowe, a Coast Guard spokesman, said Groat will be interviewed when the Billie Marie arrives in Los Angeles on Sunday.

John Ennis of Morro Bay was told of his son’s death Monday night, just after a party celebrating his 75th birthday. John Ennis, a fisherman for more than 40 years, said his son had been fishing for most of his life.

“He had a good boat,” his father said, “and he knew how to handle it.”

John Ennis has lost many friends to similar accidents. “There’s generally never a good explanation for these things,” he said. “I don’t know how to make it better.”

Jim Murphy, president of the Morro Bay Fuel Dock, said news of the accident came as a bitter shock. “He was well-respected, and he was a really nice guy,” Murphy said. “It’s a real tragic loss in the industry.”

The accident happened, according to Murphy, because Morro Bay fishermen must sail further and further from home to fish.

Dick Rodgers, chief Harbor Patrol officer for Morro Bay, said he and many others on the waterfront want more details about how the accident could have happened. Richard Ennis was such a veteran seaman that many can’t believe he could have died in such an accident.

John Ennis moved to Morro Bay in 1951. He has since retired, and his son lived close by.

“He was a good son, a good fisherman and an honest person,” John Ennis said. “That’s about all I can say.”