

He's never really left the sea

By BILL AKERS

In early January, 1944, a 44-ship convoy made its way through heavy seas and intermittent snow squalls, bound from Nova Scotia to England, the ships heavily-laden with precious war cargo. One of those ships was the James Harrod, a Liberty merchantman built just the year before.

Shortly before 4 a.m. on that dark night, the skipper, asleep in his bunk fully dressed as was the rule, was jarred into wakefulness by the sound of a crash and the lurch of his ship. "I thought we had been torpedoed or had struck a mine," he writes in his official report on the incident.

It was not that, but almost as bad. In the blackness of the night, with all 44 ships in the convoy and their escorts running blacked out, a Dutch tanker directly ahead of the Harrod had broken down and was drifting out of control.

The skipper of the Harrod was on the bridge in an instant, finding that the second officer on duty had ordered "full astern" on the telegraph. But that and subsequent evasive action wouldn't work. The crippled tanker swung in front of the Harrod and there was a collision.

The skipper saw that another ship on his port side was suddenly showing his "not under command" lights and drifting toward him, also, making a bad situation worse.

Lying with "my bow well into her," the skipper of the Harrod stopped engine until he could assess the situation, but then ordered his ship backed off when the stricken tanker caught fire. In the forward part of his ship

was the ammunition for the deck guns, too close to the fire for comfort.

Once apart, he offered assistance to the burning tanker, then assessed the damage to his own ship. There were holes in both sides of the bow and the foreward holds were shipping water.

A British escort vessel pulled alongside and, with blinker light, offered to help and asked, "Do you think you're fit to make the passage?"

It was four days back to Halifax from which the convoy had sailed, and eight days to England where the ship's load of grain and general cargo was sorely needed. "Believe so, the skipper replied, "We're going to try."

"Good show," the Briton blinkered back. "Keep it up."

Although left behind by the convoy, the Harrod plowed on, alone, at one point battling a storm with winds of hurricane force, but it made it to England. (The burning tanker had turned back to Halifax.) Hasty repairs had staunched the flow of water to a point where the pumps could keep up.

The skipper of the Harrod who earned the "Good show" from the skipper of the British escort vessel, was a man better known by most today as a businessman and community builder than a sea captain, but he is all of those things. He's Ken Izant.

Izant went to sea as a youth just out of high school in 1929 and sailed until the end of World War II when he walked off the last ship he was to command—the C-2 Carrier Pigeon—in San

Francisco. During that time he had seen most of the world battled fierce storms and huge seas, dodged enemy U-boats, and even had his fully-loaded ammunition ship hit and set afire by a kamikaze pilot during the battle for Okinawa. Izant got the surviving members of the crew off before the ship sunk, but 13 had been killed when the Japanese plane slammed into the side of the ammunition carrier.

"If he had hit us anywhere but in the engine room, we'd have blown up," Izant said, recalling the events of that spring day in 1945.

Izant was born in Santa Cruz, and moved to Soquel in 1920 when he was 10 years old. His mother, Ida Folsom Izant, was a native of Santa Cruz, and his father, Bertram Howard Izant, came to this country from England when he was 10 years old.

"We moved into the oldest house in Soquel," Izant recalls. At the time, the highway from Santa Cruz to Watsonville was being paved, but the pavement had only reached the outskirts of Soquel. "They hadn't reached our house yet."

It was while he was in high school he got the bug to go to sea. "I had two friends who shipped out on the Dollar Lines as musicians, and they told me all about it."

When he graduated in 1929, he decided he wanted some of the sea life. "It was during the depression and jobs were hard to get. I walked the waterfront in San Francisco until I got a job as an ordinary seaman."

Now, over 45 years later, he remembers the ship, where it

went and the cargo it carried. "It was the Cuzco, a dirty old freighter built in Japan for the US after World War I. You never forget your first ship."

On the Cuzco Izant went down to the west coast of South America with a cargo of case oil and came back with nitrate and copper.

"I was in the forecabin with 11 seamen—the youngest and littlest on the boat. It was pretty rough going. You got clean linen every fortnight." That trip took three months.

Izant worked as an ordinary seaman with the American Hawaiian Lines for three years before getting his rating as an able-bodied (AB) seaman. "I thought I was a real seaman, then," he said. After three years as an AB and 10 voyages to the Orient, Izant earned his third mate papers.

"You had to be a third mate to be a quartermaster," he said. "Jobs were hard to get in those days. There were skippers in the forecabin shipping as quartermasters trying to get jobs as third or fourth mates."

Eventually, Izant made second, then chief mate, and "sailed everywhere, around the world a couple of times, the Cape of Good Hope a number of times—I never made the Horn. . ."

He was a chief mate when the war broke out in Europe, and he recalls sailing through the Mediterranean with two big wooden American flags he had made hoisted on the sides of the ship with spotlights shining them. A submarine surfaced and ordered the ship to stop. "We couldn't see him (in the darkness) but we could hear his engines as he went clear around us . . . we thought for sure he would sink us . . . then he went away."

He was in Calcutta on a ship called the Oklahoma when the US was brought into the war. "We came home alone," he relates.

The Japanese were all over the Indian Ocean. Sailing blacked out at night and putting in when it could during the day, the ship made its way from Calcutta to Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, Havana, Key West, Baltimore and New York.

"It took us two months to get home." During that voyage, he said, "we came across big oil slicks and we knew some tanker had been knocked down."

Izant had earned his masters license by that time, and was given his first command, the James A. Harrod out of Portland, Ore. "I was king of the roost," he said, smiling. "It was quite a thrill."

On his first voyage to Australia, the cargo included deck cargo of Navy torpedo alcohol. "About halfway over, I noticed some of the crew were getting drunk. I couldn't figure what happened."

It didn't take him long to find out the crew had "discovered the torpedo juice. Everybody had a stash. I had a drunk crew till we got to Australia."

There were several voyages with that ship—including the one to England—a couple of Liberties, and then he was given command of the E. A. Christensen. "Then there were four or five different Liberties—I was the company's trial captain and I would shake down the ship and crews before turning it over."

Then came the Hobbs Victory—and Okinawa.

Izant had anchored at Kerma Retto, a small island just off Okinawa with his full cargo of ammunition, when he got orders to move to another anchorage because of air raid warnings. "Our gun crews had been at general quarters most of the time . . ." his official report reads.

At the new anchorage he joined two other ammunition ships, the Logan Victory and Pierre Victory. The kamikazes came again, one hitting and sinking an LST and another heading for the Pierre. The three ships began firing and shot the plane down, but another plane came in and hit the Logan Victory, blowing her up.

"I knew I shouldn't be there," Izant said.

Because it would take too long to hoist anchor, he slipped the chain and ran out to sea. It was just at dusk when he was heading back to the anchorage when it happened—a lone Japanese plane roared in and slammed into the side of the ship, but not before it was riddled and set afire by the gun crew.

Izant gave orders to abandon the doomed ship. When it had slowed down sufficiently—"we were making 15 knots"—he put the two surviving boats safely into the sea. Some of the men had jumped when the ship was hit. After inspecting the ship to make sure all survivors were off, Izant "climbed down the ladder and swam to the boats." They were

picked up by a Navy escort vessel. The ship blew up and sank early the next day.

In Izant's scrapbook are copies of letters he sent to the wives, mothers and brothers of the crewmen who died that day, telling each how it happened and the kind of crew they were.

His last command was the Carrier Pigeon—named after Pigeon Point—which he took to Einewetok, back to San Francisco and then to the Philippines. That's where he was when the Japanese surrender came. "We discharged our cargo and headed back to San Francisco empty. That's when I quit the sea."

Izant went into partnership with his brother, Bertram, in hardware store in Soquel when he came back. "A year later we built a new store across the creek."

"I thought I would make a trip or two a year," he said.

Then came the flood of 1955. "It damned near ruined us."

They had flood insurance—"that saved our necks . . . but we had to work so hard to build back I never got to go back to sea."

That flood also launched Izant on his career as a champion for his community.

"The bridge over the creek was partly destroyed, and the supervisors wanted to rebuild it. I headed a group to fight the supervisors on that. We wanted it torn down and a new single-span bridge built."

"We fought for several months on this, and they finally built a new one—the one that's there now. It's not a single-span, but it's better than the old one."

After that, for four or five years, Izant took a tractor into the creek bed to clear it "so that when high water came down it wouldn't build up under the bridge."

"We did that until the game wardens got such power that they can dictate what you can do in the creek. The game wardens have too much power. They value fish more than people."

Over the years, the creek bed has built up, Izant declares, "and you can't get a permit to go in and clean it out. If they have heavy rains this year, they're going to have trouble."

In 1956, there were problems in the Santa Cruz high school district. There was a recall election and Izant was elected to the board. At the time, school officials wanted to rebuild the old Santa Cruz High School, he remembers, "but I was in the minority and we couldn't stop them."

"After that, they needed a new high school site. The balance on the board had shifted and I lobbied for a new site in Soquel."

It took three bond issues before the new school and site was approved. Izant did his part by going up to the proposed site on Sundays with a loudspeaker, drawing a crowd to "see the site and vote right." The site, he says, "didn't look like much in those days, cows roaming around and a lot of thistles . . ." But the bond issue passed and the site was purchased and the school built. "It was a good site," he says, but adding with a tone of regret in his voice, "they don't take care of it (the school) . . . there's trash around . . . vandalism . . ."

His term on the school board ended, Izant turned to another battle. The Santa Cruz-Watsonville Road was known as Old Highway 1, and the supervisors wanted to rename it. It was Soquel Ave. up to Paul Sweet Road, and Santa Cruz officials

wanted the rest of it to be called East Soquel Ave.

"We didn't like that," Izant said, "so John Llewelyn, myself and another guy went to the (supervisors) hearings. We proposed Soquel Drive," and that is what the road was named.

In 1948 he was a prime mover in the organization of the Soquel fire protection district.

A volunteer fireman for 33 years himself, he has been chairman of the district board since 1958. It has grown from an all-volunteer operation with one small truck, to a department with two paid officers, 35 volunteers and three pumpers, attack truck, tanker and rescue unit.

Water was also very much on Izant's mind in previous years. After the 1955 flood, the Army Corps of Engineers wanted to build a dam on Soquel Creek, and Izant recalls, and "Ed Peretto, Tiny Clark, me and some others tried to form a county water district from 41st Ave. to La Selva Beach."

The proposed district got smaller as La Selva and Rio del Mar wanted out, and "Aptos and Seacliff knew it would be a failure." But the Soquel Creek County Water District was finally formed, with the east boundary on Borrego Gulch.

In 1960 the district was given approval on a \$1.75 million bond issue to buy the old Monterey Bay Water Co. which owned the old La Selva Beach, Rio del Mar, Aptos, Seacliff and Soquel-Capitola water companies. "When the bond issue passed, we bought the district and began the major improvements."

He adds, "I think it has been a

success. We have 9,000 connections now and a pretty good money standby. We were the first in the county to establish storage and transmission fees—\$150 at that time."

These were put in, he said, so that newcomers coming into the area would help pay for the water system they would use.

"There were a lot of complaints," he says, "We were accused of holding back growth, but we rode it out and now it's the standard thing. It has been our mainstay."

Izant finally was able to realize his earlier hope of going back to sea.

"It was 1969, and the Vietnam War was on. We had a clerk at the store (Izant's Hardware) who'd been a seaman, and he made a trip as an AB." It was a six-weeks voyage.

"I said, 'If Hal can do it, I can do it too,' so I cleared with the Coast Guard and unions and shipped out as a third mate."

His ship was the Beloit Victory, an old World War II Victory ship, "an old rust bucket," as he puts it. He expected it to be a six-weeks voyage.

After going to Vietnam and unloading, the ship was ordered to the Atlantic and put to work hauling US Army trucks from Belgium to Spain for reconditioning. The trucks were then to be shipped on to Vietnam.

On this trip, Izant said the regular officers—all much younger than he—called him "the tourist." He said he stood night watches so he could spend the days visiting the countries he was in. In that way he got around Vietnam, Spain, Egypt, Ham-

burg, Rotterdam—"I had some nice trips in Rotterdam."

Finally, after loading up with Army personnel and equipment, the ship headed back to Mobile, Ala., then up the Mississippi to New Orleans from where he flew home. The voyage had taken six months, "and I enjoyed every minute of it."

He still keeps in touch with the sea, but in a smaller way. He has a 24-foot cruiser he's made into a fishing boat, and is now a commercial fisherman. He goes out three or four times a week. "I just hope to make expenses." Sometimes his wife, Lillie, goes out with him.

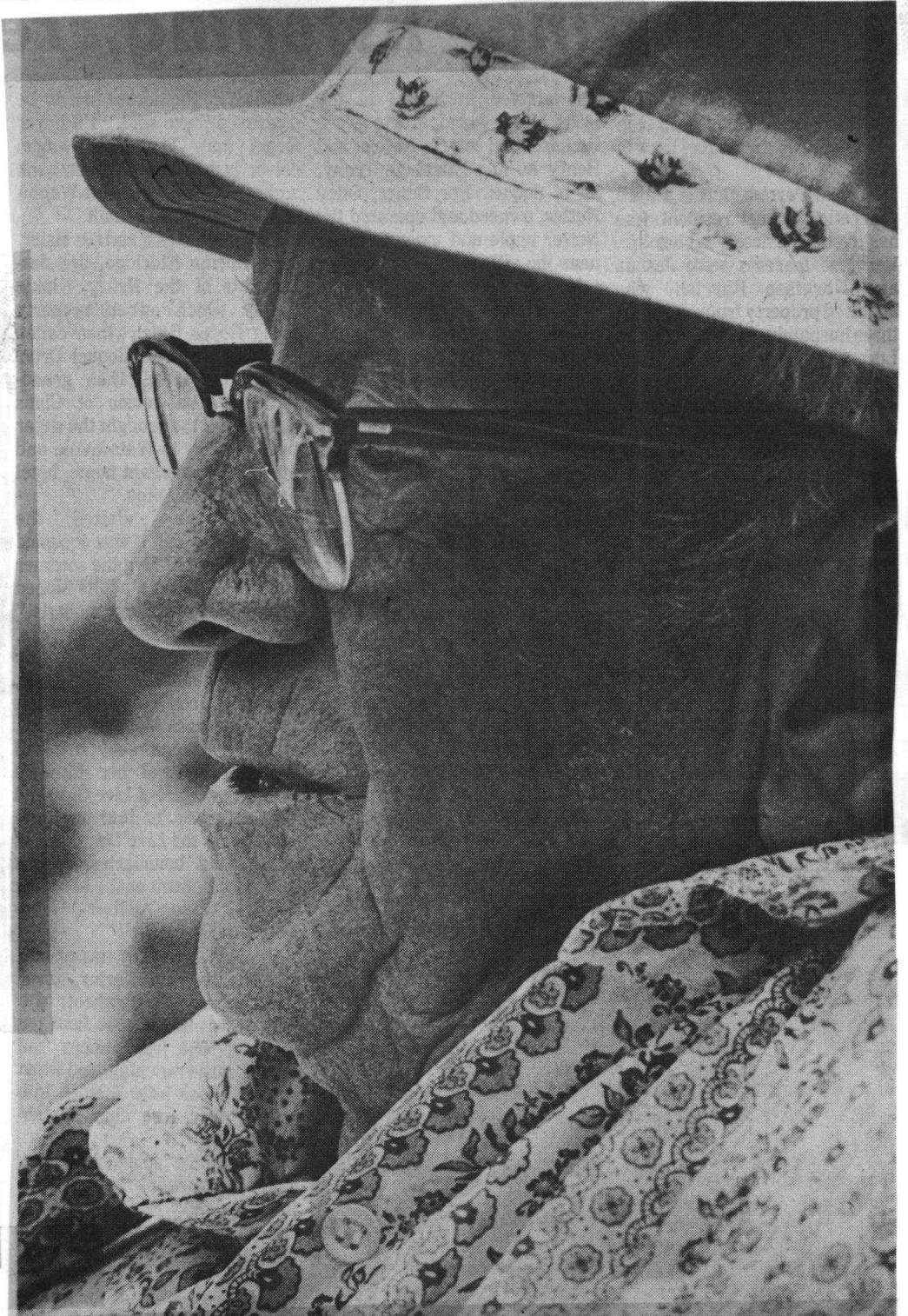
His boat is berthed at the north harbor in Santa Cruz. Indicating the other boats docked nearby with a sweep of his hand, he says, "We're all friends. 'We've built up sort of a competition. It's a club almost.'"

As for the fishing, "When you're out there, you forget everything else. Besides," he adds, "it keeps me active and it's better than sitting around on your duff and thinking all the time."

Izant, who sold his hardware store six years ago, sums up his drive to do things by saying, "When I get started on something, I can't let go. I'm funny that way."

It's a good thing, too, for without that tenacity Soquel High school may have been somewhere else, Soquel Drive called something else, and who knows what the fate of the fire and water districts would have been.

And England would not have received that precious cargo during that dark and stormy winter of 1944.



Ken Izant—"When I get on something, I can't let go. . ."

— Photos by Chris Stewart



"We're all friends. . . it's a club, almost."