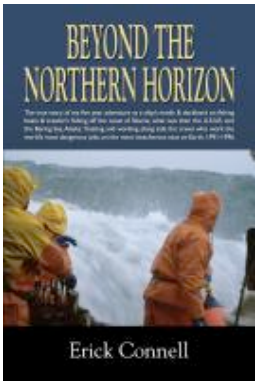
BEYOND THE NORTHERN HORIZON

The true story of my five year adventure as a ship's medic & deckhand on fishing boats & trawler's fishing off the coast of Siberia, what was then the U.S.S.R. and the Bering Sea, Alaska. Treating and working along side the crews who work the world's most dangerous jobs, on the most treacherous seas on Earth. 1991-1996

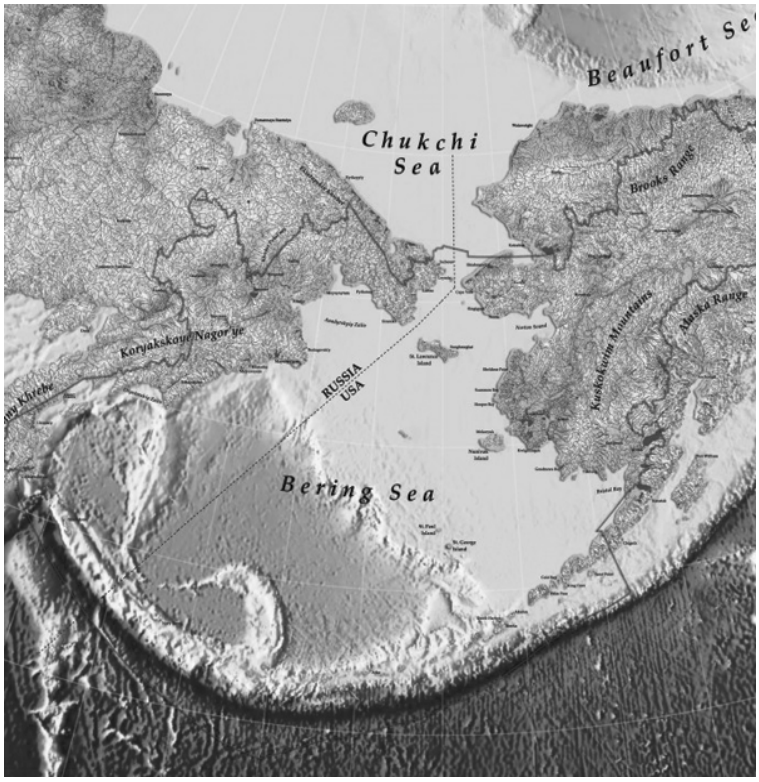
Erick Connell



In 1991, Erick Connell was living and working in the Seattle/Tacoma area as an E.M.T. III responding to 911 calls for a large ambulance company. One day, Erick saw an employment ad for E.M.T.'s to work on crab boats sailing to the Russian far east. He was hired to perform the most dangerous job on Earth, in the most treacherous seas, treating the injured and sick hundreds of miles from the nearest hospital. This is his story.

Beyond the Northern Horizon

Beyond the Northern Horizon



Bering Sea

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"No matter how important a man at sea may consider himself unless he is fundamentally worthy, the sea will someday find him."

-Felix Riesenberg

Chapter 5

M/V Royal Enterprise

Aleutian Island, Bering Sea

A week later, at the end of August, I arrived at the pier where the *Royal Enterprise* was docked. It was a typical drizzly, overcast morning. There was a lot of activity around and onboard the ship as I carried my gear up the gangway.

Forklifts on the docks scurried back and forth, and cranes lifted pallets of supplies from the pier onto the deck of the boat. Flashes from welding torches at various places on the vessel forced me to keep turning my head to avoid eye contact with the welder's flame. Pneumatic air hoses, welding hoses, various pieces of equipment and compressors, tools, and scrap metal made it difficult to make my way

across the deck and stay out of the way of all the activity taking place around me.

I figured the wheelhouse would be the best place to check in, but I wasn't sure of the best way to get there. I caught the eye of a passing guy who appeared he might be a member of the crew. "Hey, how do I get to the wheelhouse?" I quickly asked before he had a chance to get away.

He started to give me directions then seeing the look on my face, he stopped in midsentence realizing the folly in explaining the complicated layout of the ship to a greenhorn like myself. Somewhat annoyed, he said, "Follow me, I'll take you there." I followed him through the narrow passageway up a flight of metal steps to the wheelhouse. Before I could thank the guy for bringing me up there, he turned and vanished out the way we had come.

There I met Mike, the deck boss. He was a big man about six foot four or so and around 250 pounds. He had a large barrel chest, a black beard, and black shaggy hair sticking out from under a worn-out, dirty ball cap. The skin of his face was etched with lines and wrinkles, resembling worn leather from his years at sea exposed to the wind and saltwater.

He walked over to where I was, and we shook hands, holding our grip for a moment while we sized each other up. "My name's Mike," he finally said.

"Hey good to meet you, my name is Erick. I'll be your medic on this voyage."

"Well, I guess the first thing to do is get your gear stowed and find a bunk," he said. "Then you'll need to get an inventory of the medical supplies we have on board and make a list of what you think you're going to need. Give it to me as soon as possible, so we can get it on board. We're scheduled to leave in two days, so you'd better get right on it." With that I started to get organized and prepared for our departure.

I had never prepared a ship for its medical needs before, and they had never had a medic on any of their previous voyages, so I was making an educated guess on what it was I would need and how much. If I missed something and it turned out we did need it, and things

turned bad, it would be my fault. I began to feel the pressure I would be under most of the trip, being responsible for the welfare of the crew and keeping the ship from having to abort its voyage and return to Dutch Harbor if someone really got hurt bad.

Also, these guys had been fishing for years without a trained medic on board and were skeptical of the need for me. The captain didn't feel we needed anything more than the basic first aid kit they had always carried on board, so getting anything was going to be a challenge. After some convincing, I was able to get him to agree on suture kits, antibiotics, and pain meds. I had to remind him that where we were going, there was not going to be any U.S. Coast Guard coming to our rescue as he had been used to in the Alaskan Sea. What finally did the trick was reminding him of the money we could lose if we had to return to Dutch if I was unable to successfully treat a serious injury.

This had seemed obvious to me, and I was surprised that I had to convince the captain. I sensed that these men took pride in their toughness and ability to endure hardship and pain and didn't take kindly to any suggestion that they might need someone like me to look after them. I realized that I was going to have to prove myself to these men and hoped I'd be up to the challenge.

In the week before I arrived on board, I had a five-day training period at Swedish Hospital in Seattle with Dr. Patrick Eastman, an emergency room physician and the owner of a private company, Maritime Health Services. I not only was given some training on some of the possible emergency procedures I might have to administer at sea that I was not trained in, such as suturing. I was also briefed on some of the possible medical supplies I might need as well.

Maritime Health Services is a company that helps facilitate any aspect of medical care that might be needed by a vessel at sea; such as information on what to do for any given emergency procedure and arranging for transportation to the proper medical facility if a crewman needed to be evacuated from the ship or any advice. I would be in contact with Dr. Eastman on a fairly regular basis throughout the trip. I made a call to him to get his advice on a list of items I'd need and then ordered them.

As the day arrived for us to leave, I awoke pretty excited. It turned out to be a beautiful day. Around nine thirty that morning, we were ready to go. I joined the crew on deck to help cast off the lines that held us to the pier. One at a time, they were hauled in, and the *Royal Enterprise*, 110-feet long, slowly moved away from the dock and got underway.

As we moved out into Elliot Bay, we had a panoramic view of downtown Seattle, called the Emerald City, with its beautiful skyline. Soon it was passing behind us as we made our way into Puget Sound. A strong feeling of adventure swelled in my chest as we stowed the mooring lines below and prepared the ship for the open ocean.

By that afternoon, we were nearing the Pacific Ocean as we passed the high snow-capped mountains of the Olympic Mountain range on the Washington State coast. As the sun was setting over the western horizon, the *Royal Enterprise*'s bow began to slice through the white-capped waves of the Pacific. The wind carried the salt spray of the waves over the bow, drenching the forward decks and the wheelhouse with ice-cold water. We were on a north by northwest heading bound for our first destination, Dutch Harbor, Alaska.

It was a seven-day voyage to Dutch Harbor. The weather remained good the entire way. Clear skies and sunshine greeted us each morning as we continued north. The crew settled into routine twelve-hour shifts. Our main entertainment at night was watching movies in the galley on VHS tapes on the ship's VCR. Most of our time was spent working in the processing area where the equipment used to cook and freeze the crab had to be cleaned, reassembled, and made ready for the coming season.

Each night I'd make it a point to step out on deck and get some fresh air and a little quiet time. That shift to an ocean consciousness slowly began to take hold as I gazed at the seemingly endless expanse of water day after day, night after night. I'd felt it before many years earlier as a young seaman; then it was returning with a feeling of how immense the oceans were and how small and very far away I was.

We pulled into Unalaska Bay on the morning of September 2, 1991 around seven thirty in the morning and tied up at the pier. Dutch Harbor is located on Amaknak Island. There are no trees that grow

naturally on the Aleutian Islands. The rolling hills and 5,500-foot volcano are covered with a tall, thick carpet of beautiful green grass sprinkled with a variety of wildflowers and wild berries. These islands are almost continually covered in fog and mist, and it rains around 250 inches a year, making it one of the wettest places in the United States. As luck would have it, that day was a rare sunny, beautiful day.

We'd spend several days there loading our crab pots, food, salt and "fiber," the cardboard boxes that the crab legs would be packed in.

Our shifts were changed there to sixteen hours a day staggered as we needed to on load and set sail as soon as possible. This schedule would mean loading operations could continue twenty-four hours a day until the job was finished. The crew split into sections that started eight hours apart, ensured we'd have the manpower to accomplish this. No time was wasted on fishing boats; as soon as we were tied to the docks, trucks started to arrive with the tons of supplies we'd need on our three-month voyage. If I hadn't signed on as a crewman, I could be in the galley watching movies as the loading operations were underway, making $200 dollars a day. It then dawned on me the consequences of my decision in Seattle.

I was in pretty good shape. I was thirty-four years old, six feet tall and weighed around 175 pounds. I wasn't a stranger to hard work and had done plenty of it in my time, although it had been a few years already since I had really done any. All that was about to change as from there on out I'd be introduced to a level and intensity of work few people in this modern age ever experience. It would test me to my limits and beyond.

"It's only in adventure that some people succeed in knowing themselves, in finding themselves."

—Andre Gide

Chapter 7
In Bering's Wake

Lava erupting, Kamchatka

It was a four-day voyage to the Kamchatka Peninsula where we were scheduled to pick up three Russian fishery observers. The first night out of Dutch, we went on four-hour wheel-watch shifts at night. I was given a lesson on chart reading and navigation so I could fill one of the four-hour slots during the night on our way across the Bering Sea. That was how I found myself at the helm of a 110-foot ship as it plowed its way through the night bound for Siberia. Gone were the days of the ship's wheel and compass I had learned in the Coast Guard decades before. These days the ship could be steered by a knob on a console; beside the compass was a satellite GPS system. Although

technology had changed, being at the helm of a ship on the open ocean was still quite a thrill, with the lives of everyone on board my responsibility.

There's a swivel chair bolted to the deck where you sit behind a console. You have a commanding view overlooking the bow and the sea beyond. A radar screen with its eerie green light is in front of you on the console, illuminating the otherwise dark wheelhouse. The radar shows what's around you in a twenty-mile circle. The radio waves reflect back off the top of the waves if the seas are high enough and produce a sparkling of lights on the screen.

No responsible sailor will trust his life to radar 100 percent, so the hours are spent whether day or night scanning the horizon for anything that might ruin your life if you happened to run into it. However tempting it becomes to doze off for a moment or two while all alone in the middle of the night staring out into empty space, any man with half a brain will constantly remind himself of the disaster that awaits any fool who dares.

On the morning of the third day, our course put us sailing past Bering Island. I first observed the island on the boat's radar screen in the wheelhouse. The early morning was very grey and overcast with banks of fog and rain. There was little chance to see anything in these conditions; besides, we were about five miles south of the island as well.

Despite the dismal conditions, at one point while passing the island, its gloomy grey silhouette emerged out of the mist on our horizon. I grabbed a pair of binoculars off the radar console and looked out at the island. It appeared like a grey ghost in an unearthly dream. The feeling of absolute isolation and despair welled up inside me as I thought of Captain Bering and his crew stranded there for months through the winter of 1741-1742. For a few minutes, I had the feeling of the utter loneliness they must have felt before the island vanished behind a fog bank and was gone.

By the next morning, we had covered the three hundred miles or so from Bering Island to the Kamchatka coast outside the entrance to Avacha Bay. It had taken the surviving crew of Bering's expedition fourteen days to cover the same distance. Unlike the day before, that

morning was crystal clear; the towering volcanoes surrounding Petropavlovsk, covered in snow, stood out brilliantly against the beautiful sky blue horizon. Koryakskaya, the largest, is 11,339 feet high.

We were restricted from entering the bay and docking at Petropavlovsk due to the fact that Rybachiy Nuclear Submarine Base, Russia's largest, was located in the bay. However friendly the relationship had become between the United States and the Soviet Union, they certainly hadn't become that friendly. Yet shortly after we had dropped our anchor, we were treated to a rare sight that few people anywhere have seen. A Soviet nuclear-powered submarine was on the surface entering the bay in broad daylight.

Russian nuclear sub Boomer entering Avacha Bay

Later in the afternoon, a small boat appeared in the distance heading our way. As it got closer, we were told that was the boat carrying the biologist we were expecting. Most of the crew gathered on the starboard rail to get a look. The vessel was about thirty feet long and resembled a cross between a tugboat and a ride at Disney World. It nudged up to our side bow first, and the three observers climbed on board followed by their gear that was unceremoniously tossed over to our boat. Immediately after the Russians were on board, the tug pulled away. We weighed anchor and set sail.

Our course was south by southeast following the coastline of the massive peninsula. Below us was the Kuril Trench with a depth of over twenty-six thousand feet of water. This is where the two tectonic plates collide together, forcing one down underneath the other, forming the deep trench and the massive amount of volcanic activity that had formed the Kamchatka Peninsula. Throughout the day as we sailed on, the towering peaks of huge volcanoes followed us in an awesome procession.

We made our turn at the tip of the peninsula and made our way through the Kuril Straits between Cape Lopatka and Shumshu Island. Soon the Alaid Volcano loomed on the horizon. This island volcano rises up from the sea bottom 9,840 feet then from sea level another 7,674 feet. A dirty grey plume of smoke and ash rose out of its cone and drifted off over the western horizon like an ancient primal finger pointing out our way to the unknown sea beyond.

As we entered the Sea of Okhotsk, I was busy working in the processing area helping the engineers put the final touches on the equipment we'd use to process our catch. Justin, our interpreter, came in and said I was needed in the galley. Apparently my first medical case had arrived

He explained to me as we made our way to the galley that the deckhand Kevin had part of his molar break off while eating and was in excruciating pain. Dentistry, great! Now I was a dentist. We quickly arrived to find Kevin, a full-grown, very rugged man, in tears, moaning and writhing around uncontrollably, in pain from the exposed nerves. "Doc, for Christ's sake, do something. I can't take this pain," he said as I came in close to get a look in his mouth. He handed me the chunk of tooth that had broken off as he continued to squirm and moan.

I took a good look at the piece of tooth and then peered into Kevin's mouth. I quickly learned that in situations where you had no idea what you were doing it was important to act like you did. This bought the critical time to figure something out that might work, thus saving face and your job.

The first thing was to get his pain under control. I turned to Justin and asked him to get my medical bag. He soon returned, and I decided to use both ibuprofen orally, 800 mg, and prepare an injection of

Lidacaine. The ibuprofen would take twenty minutes to take effect but hopefully would stop the pain for hours; the Lidacaine would act immediately, enabling me to try and fix his tooth.

There are few circumstances more dreaded than to have a dental emergency at sea. Everyone instinctively knows you're in deep shit. The world of dentistry to a sailor is a strange and mysterious one, much more so than to land-dwelling folks for reasons I've never come to understand. Perhaps because being thousands of miles from civilization in a slow-moving boat that in the best of conditions will take days or weeks to return to a port, the thought of dealing with the unique pain levels that a tooth can bring to bear on a man is terrifying. I've seen it reduce the largest, strongest, toughest man to his knees, crying like a child for his mother.

So when I produced a long needle on the end of a syringe, Kevin barely flinched. Once he understood that this needle offered him his only chance at salvation from his current ordeal, he became more than willing to allow me to inject the medication around his fractured tooth into his gums. Nevertheless I was really glad he was unaware that it was my first time doing anything like this.

Apparently I was hitting the right places for almost immediately he began to calm down and relax as the medication blocked the pain receptors to his brain. A smile slowly grew on his face as he became convinced this was working. At that moment, I became a hero as the rest of the crew let out murmurs of approval and delight at the apparent magic I had just performed.

Then for the hard part, I knew this was just temporary so if I did not come up with a successful plan immediately, this could significantly delay our voyage. I had temporary filling epoxy in my bag, but that would not hold his tooth together.

I made Kevin comfortable in a bunk and told him I'd be right back, everything was under control, and I'd take care of this problem. I stepped in the ship's office, shut the door, and sat down. Alone for the moment, I let out a deep sigh and slumped over in the chair. *Think!* I needed something that would glue the broken chunk of tooth back in place.

Upon my examination, I saw that the piece fit like a puzzle; neatly back against the remaining tooth. I just needed something that would hold it in place until we returned to the United States.

I sat up and leaned back in my chair. My mind went kind of blank as I began to slowly look around at my surroundings in the office. A typical office with all the regular paraphernalia was laid out on the desk: a stapler, pens and stacks of paper, a bottle of White-Out, a computer, and a tube of superglue. *A tube of superglue,* I leaned over and picked up the small tube of glue. *We've all seen the commercials, right? Superglue will glue anything!*

What I was thinking at that moment was crazy, or was it? I'd just taken a look at the directions for use on the back of the tube: will glue wood, glass, stone, ceramic, metal, and almost everything; make sure surface to be glued is clean and dry. As I read the directions, the more convinced I was this might work. Besides, I was running out of ideas and time.

"What the hell," I said out loud. "What do I have to lose?"

With that I grabbed the tube of superglue and went back to where Kevin was resting. "OK, let's get this over with," I said in a reassuring tone. I had Kevin gargle with mouthwash; while he was doing that, I dropped the tooth fragment into a pan of alcohol. I had Kevin then sit in a chair and tilt his head back. I packed cotton balls between his cheek and gums, upper and lower, on both sides of his mouth. If this was going to work, his mouth had to be completely dry.

With his head tilted back and his eyes closed (perfect), I explained to him that I had some dental glue I hoped would hold the broken piece in place until we got back home. I added as a way out that the glue had been in the medical bag for what appeared to be years, and I wasn't sure it was still good.

"OK, hold still while I put the fragment in place." With that I put one drop of superglue on the fragment, reached into his open mouth, and set the piece back into position. It fit back in place perfectly. I wiped the excess glue off with my gloved finger and stepped back.

"Hold still now for just a minute longer. I know it's uncomfortable with all those cotton balls in your mouth, but it will just be a minute," I

said, crossing my fingers. After a minute, I removed all the cotton balls and said, "How does it feel?"

Kevin sat up, moved his jaw around, and opened and shut his mouth a few times. Finally satisfied, he looked at me and said, "Feels good, Doc. I think you did it."

"Open one more time," I replied. I took another look using a dental mirror to get a good view. Damn, it was holding. It looked great. "OK, here's the deal," I explained. "Baby that side of your mouth as much as possible, try to chew on the other side only, and brush very lightly over that tooth, understand?"

"Yeah, Doc, I got it."

With that he got up, and I followed him back to the galley where some of the crew waited to see the outcome. Handshakes and pats on the back followed as the word spread that I had been successful. I went back to work in the processing compartment, although every day we were at sea, I worried if the glue would hold. Kevin never had any trouble with that tooth the rest of our voyage. I had a very steep learning curve to overcome, but I was learning.

The weather was grey, cloudy, with wind and rain. The time had come for our crabbing operations to begin. When we were in Dutch Harbor, we had loaded three hundred crab pots on the stern of the *Royal Enterprise*. They were stacked side by side in rows and on top of each other, rising thirty feet high or three stories. They were tied together individually with pieces of nylon rope about three feet long, each pot tied to the one beside it and to the one above and below on the upper stacks.

Then as the ship's crane began to lift them from the stack and prepare them to be dropped overboard, the crew had to untie all these hundreds of ropes as each pot became exposed and was ready to be moved. Being part of the crew, I joined in and climbed up to the top of the stack and found a spot to fit in and began the process of unlashing the pots.

I quickly realized that this was very dangerous work. The ship was rolling side to side, and I was standing on metal railings of the frames of the pots with wet boots forty feet above the ocean whose temperature hovered at about thirty-eight degrees. As each pot was

lifted from the stack in the rolling seas, the eight-hundred-pound pots swung back and forth seemingly determined to sweep all of us off into the sea.

This was life-and-death work where you had to keep your head on a swivel at all times; a moment's lapse of attention could be fatal. From thereon out, this was to be the norm, and my responsibility on this voyage became crystal clear. So important was my presence on the ship that after about two hours on the stack, the captain happened to recognize me through all my rain gear and came out from the wheelhouse shouting for the crew to get me off the stack.

"Doc, get your ass off there. Are you trying to get yourself killed, for Christ's sake? What will we do if you get hurt?" he shouted. "Find something else safer for him to do, Mike, for Christ's sake," he continued.

I looked over to the others near me on the stack to see their reaction to the order; they each looked at me and shrugged their shoulders as if to say, you tried, man, that's what counts. I slowly made my way down to the main deck a bit embarrassed and disappointed as well. I liked doing dangerous things. It made me feel alive and put me in the present moment.

Mike came over and said, "Good work up there. Sorry, go into the processing room and help John get things squared away in there, OK?"

"Yeah, sure, Mike," I replied and went inside for the rest of our shift.

That day was our first twenty on and four off schedule; from then on, operations would continue around the clock seven days a week. The way it worked, you worked a minimum of twenty hours and at some unknown time to you, you'd be approached by the deck boss and told to take your four hours off.

Normally pots are individually dropped overboard each with its own buoy attached for future pickup. On that trip, we were going to be what was called long lining where a string of thirty pots are tied to one line with a buoy attached at one end of the string and one at the other end. The pots are stacked on deck in a line, and the buoy at one end of the line is tossed off the stern along with the coils of line that connect

all the pots. As the ship moves forward, the pots are pulled off the stern one after the other until the buoy at the far end is thrown over last.

The result is a two-mile-long line of pots resting on the ocean floor, each several hundred feet apart. After enough time for them to hopefully fill with crab, usually twenty-four hours, the boat returns to one end of the line. The buoy is retrieved and starts the labor-intensive job of raising each pot in line, emptying and sorting the crab, rebating the now-empty pot, and dropping it back over the side just in time to bring up the next pot and repeat the process over and over and over again around the clock.

The only break was around every six hours. You'd be told you had fifteen minutes to go to the galley and get something to eat. Since we had no cook, this meant microwaving a frozen burrito, usually burning the hell out of the inside of your mouth eating it before it cooled from the lava state, and rushing back out on deck to continue on. The only other time during your twenty-hour shift to take a break, was when we were between strings of pots and were heading for another line a few miles or so away.

Usually it was about a half hour to the next string, and on rare occasions, it might be longer. In any case, those of us on deck would immediately go to the gear room right off the main deck and collapse on the floor with all our wet stinking gear on and fall straight to sleep, too totally exhausted to care about anything else in the entire world.

The *Royal Enterprise* was also a processor, so the backbreaking work of bringing the crab to the surface was only half the job. When the hopper was full on deck with king crab, the processing would begin. A door could be opened from inside the processing area, enabling the crab to be brought into the butchering line; and the work of butchering, cooking, freezing, and casing the crab then would take place. The finished product of a ninety-five-pound case of frozen crab was then stacked into an elevator that lowered down one deck to the freezer hold. There, usually two men worked twenty-hour shifts stacking hundreds of ninety-five-pound cases of crab in thirty degrees-below-zero temperatures.

Once the whole process of setting the pots and retrieving them then resetting and processing the catch got into full swing, the absolutely

backbreaking nightmare grind began. Very few people in Western society can fully understand the level of suffering and pain that men endure while working these operations.

For me, this was a level of work I had never experienced before and believed did not exist anymore in the twentieth century. Except for Justin, our interpreter and I, the rest of the crew took it in stride and seemed immune to the torture that I'm sure all of us were feeling.

These guys were a different breed of men, the kind of men I'd read about in books that lived a hundred years or more ago. It never occurred to me that somewhere in the world today their kind still existed. Yet I had not only found they did indeed still exist; but, by some strange fate I had put myself into a position to somehow equal their incredible feats of strength and endurance. It was apparent from the get-go that there was no way out of this. If I could have quit I would have; being on a small boat in the middle of a sea off the coast of Siberia made that option impossible.

The only way out was through. I had unwittingly set myself up for the greatest physical and mental challenge of my life, and there was nothing I could do to change this fact. Luckily for me, I had skirted this world before in other experiences in my life.

I began to draw upon some of the lessons I had learned from those experiences. The most important one of these lessons was that the mind gives up long before the body. The level of human strength is 99 percent mental. Just believing this doesn't make anything any easier, but it gives you a place to start the minute-by-minute, day-by-day struggle you're involved in. It gives you an anchor in which to hold yourself in place against the waves of anguish and despair that constantly break over you during your ordeal.

This is the one thing I had that my closest friend on the boat, Justin, did not. The difference of understanding this seemingly minor truth, that the mind controls the body, and never showing weakness in front of men like these under any circumstances, would begin to play itself out in dramatic fashion in the days to come.

It was late September by now. The days grew shorter and with this the wind shifted to the north, bringing down cold Arctic air. The seas began to grow more agitated as the strength of the northern wind grew.

During the winter months, the Sea of Okhotsk is covered with ice. Only the stoutest icebreakers sail her then. We needed to catch our quota as fast as possible and retreat from this sea as soon as we could. We had a long way to go, and the only way to succeed was by superhuman will and brute strength. Our fishing operations would continue 24/7 in all weather conditions until we had accomplished our mission.

Being the new guy, I was put in the baiting station, which was the worst job on deck. The bait was frozen herring and frozen meat scraps from slaughterhouses, in forty-pound blocks. On deck, mounted on the bulkhead, was a primitive but effective grinder. It ate the blocks of frozen bait without any effort and spit out the disgusting mess into a large, heavy-duty plastic tote.

From there you'd stuff the ground-up meat into large plastic jars that had holes punched throughout the containers; they were joined together in bunches of three held together by large D-ring-style carabineer hooks. After they were filled, they were run over to a crab pot that had been staged on the launcher; and climbing inside the pot on your back, you had to lift the twenty-pound jars and clip them on the netting on the top section of the pot.

This process would continue without letup as long as pots were being launched. The pace was grueling, and usually it was difficult to keep up even when you worked as fast as you could. It only took twenty minutes before you were exhausted, and not long after that, your hands continually in contact with frozen bait became frozen themselves even while wearing rubber gloves with liners. Lying on your back in the pot and trying to lift the jars into place worked a set of muscles on the back side of your arms and shoulders that you never had really used before, and it only took baiting a dozen pots before this became extremely painful.

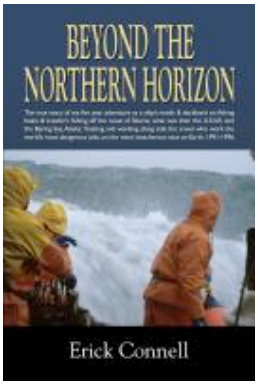
This was the most dangerous job on the boat; as the ship listed and large waves made their way over the deck, it was quite possible for them to wash the pot off the launcher overboard into the icy waters. It had happened many times before I had arrived out there, and it was one of the greatest fears for a crabber to be trapped inside a crab pot as it plunged to the depths. Needless to say, this was always on your mind

during the endless agonizing hours you were climbing into the pots. If there is a hell that exists anywhere in our universe, I was convinced then that was what a person would suffer there, baiting crab pots endlessly.

Justin was in his early twenties on this voyage. His job was to be our interpreter. Compared to the other crewmen, he was slight of build, around five feet, eight inches tall, and maybe 160 pounds. He was from Portland, a student at one of Oregon's universities, studying Russian. He was offered the same deal as I, which was to sign on as a crew member. Like me, he didn't have a clue what he was getting into and was more out of his league out there than I was.

Justin and I were just regular, middle-class twentieth-century guys. We were not cut from the same fabric as our fellow crewmates. Both of us were looked at as outsiders, land lovers, and well, pussies. These guys were a tough bunch. They had to be, to endure the incredible hardships this life at sea demanded. Therein was the difference that separated us from them. They chose to live this life after knowing full well what it took to survive. Justin and I, on the other hand, had ended up there through sheer ignorance of what we were getting ourselves into. By that point in the voyage, both of us realized we wouldn't be signing up to do this again. Already we were both just figuring out how we'd make it through the day, let alone returning for a full voyage in the future.

The daily grind continued without letup I was so sore and miserable, words cannot describe it. I was borderline seasick all the time; and on occasion, depending on the motion of the sea or the stench of the rotten crab shells and debris scattered on the processing floor, completely seasick, retching my empty guts out while continuing to work twenty-hour shifts. Out here there are no sick days or breaks for being sick or tired. Everyone is expected to work a full shift every day, the only exception being near death or death itself. None of us knew one of the rare opportunities for a break was quickly approaching.



In 1991, Erick Connell was living and working in the Seattle/Tacoma area as an E.M.T. III responding to 911 calls for a large ambulance company. One day, Erick saw an employment ad for E.M.T.'s to work on crab boats sailing to the Russian far east. He was hired to perform the most dangerous job on Earth, in the most treacherous seas, treating the injured and sick hundreds of miles from the nearest hospital. This is his story.

Beyond the Northern Horizon