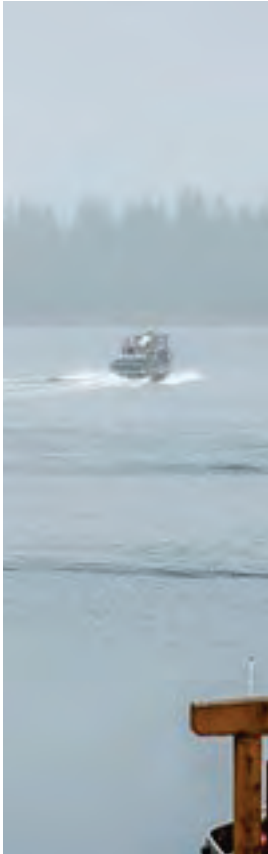


**COMMUNITY  
BUILDING  
in  
BRITISH  
COLUMBIA**

**Allen Craig Widsten**

**Nominee: The Order of British Columbia**



# contents

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## 2 CRAIG WIDSTEN

---

A PROFOUND LIFE

---

## 6 54 YEARS

---

SUPPORTING THE HEILTSUK FIRST NATION COMMUNITY OF BELLA BELLA AND ESTABLISHING AN ENDURING, RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP.

---

## 10 1969

---

1969 BC HYDRO INSTALLATION RATE REDUCTION

---

## 13 1970 - 1985

---

BOAT BUILDING ON SHEARWATER

---

## 19 1973

---

HOTELS AND RESORT

---

## 26 1980

---

DENNY ISLAND AERODROME

---

## 30 1985

---

SPORT FISHING

---

## 35 1993

---

MARINA SERVICES

---

## 41 2000

---

COASTAL FREIGHT AND MARINE BUSINESS

---

## 49 2013

---

UNITED IN HISTORY

---



# CRAIG WIDSTEN

A profound life

**C**raig Widsten left an indelible mark on the west coast of British Columbia, Canada. Throughout his life, he profoundly impacted countless individuals and communities, inspiring them with his passion, dedication, and tireless work ethic. From his early days as a young visionary to his later years as a respected community leader in various fields, Craig's legacy continues to shape the lives of those who knew him.

Born and raised on the west coast of British Columbia, Craig grew up with a deep appreciation for the region's natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. He is a curious and energetic individual who loves to explore forests and oceans and is always eager to learn about the stories and traditions of the indigenous peoples who have inhabited the area for generations.

Over the years, Craig's work, curiosity and passions led him down diverse paths. He worked

with individuals and communities to effect positive change and used his keen sense of purpose to diversify his business and community to create a vital community on an isolated island on B.C.'s Pacific west coast. Whether he was leading a push for electrification of Denny Island and Bella Bella, founding a community water system, building a water taxi and freight service that sustained dozens of small communities and First Nations villages, laying the foundation for today's eco-tourism industry on the central coast, or working with the area's First Nations for mutual benefit and better understanding and cooperation: Craig was always willing to go above and beyond to make a difference.

Today, Craig's impact is still felt throughout the west coast of British Columbia. His tireless efforts have helped to enhance, protect and preserve the region's natural beauty and cultural heritage while making life better for all residents who continue to work for a better future.

# INTRODUCTION

**O**n July 1, 2021, "Heiltsuk Day" was celebrated on Denny Island.

Heiltsuk Day marked the Heiltsuk Nation's finalized purchase and transfer of Shearwater Resort and Marina from Craig Widsten, who, over two generations and almost 75 years, developed an isolated island into a vital marine hub and community, which opened Canada's west coast to maritime traffic, fishing, and settlement.

"This purchase is about creating new economic opportunities and new memories for our people," said Marilyn Slett, elected Chief of the Heiltsuk Nation. "It is a testament to our resilience and an example of reconciliation. We look forward to building on the legacy of Shearwater and to welcoming guests into our territory in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest when it is safe to do so."

Denny Island is located on the Central Coast of British Columbia, called the Discovery Coast, 2 miles (3.2 km)

from Bella Bella. There is a regular sea bus service between Bella Bella and Shearwater on Denny Island. BC Ferries Discovery Coast Passage service runs between Port Hardy and Bella Coola, stopping at ports along the way, including Bella Bella and Shearwater. Denny Island is 100 nautical miles north of Port Hardy (on Vancouver Island) and 76 nautical miles west of Bella Coola, the nearest access point to the provincial highway system on the BC mainland (Highway 20 runs from Bella Coola to Williams Lake in the Cariboo.) The island is immersed in

the world's largest intact temperate rain-forest and is home to coastal wolves, grizzlies, black bears, and eagles.

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#### THE WIDSTEN FAMILY'S DENNY ISLAND, BELLA COOLA AND SHEARWATER LEGACY

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The Widsten family has been in the central coast area since 1894, and the grandfather of Craig Widsten was one of the original Norwegian settlers in the Bella Coola Valley.

Initially built in 1941, Shearwater (the community is named after a historic Royal Navy vessel called the HMS Shearwater, which remained operative until 1944) was the Bella Bella RCAF reconnaissance military base during the Second World War. The Canadian Government developed

it to accommodate amphibious aircraft and 1,000 servicemen. The government spent millions of dollars establishing services such as roads, water systems, sewer systems, tarmac, wharves, and buildings.

In 1947 Craig Widsten's father, the late Andrew Widsten, purchased a large part of the former RCAF station at Shearwater

property, one hanger, a seaplane landing ramp, several wooden dwellings, some docks, roads and water systems.

Soon after this purchase, Andrew Widsten oversaw the establishment of a marina and boat repair and a tug and barge service and a sawmill was built and put into operation in 1953. The mill operated until the early 1960s.

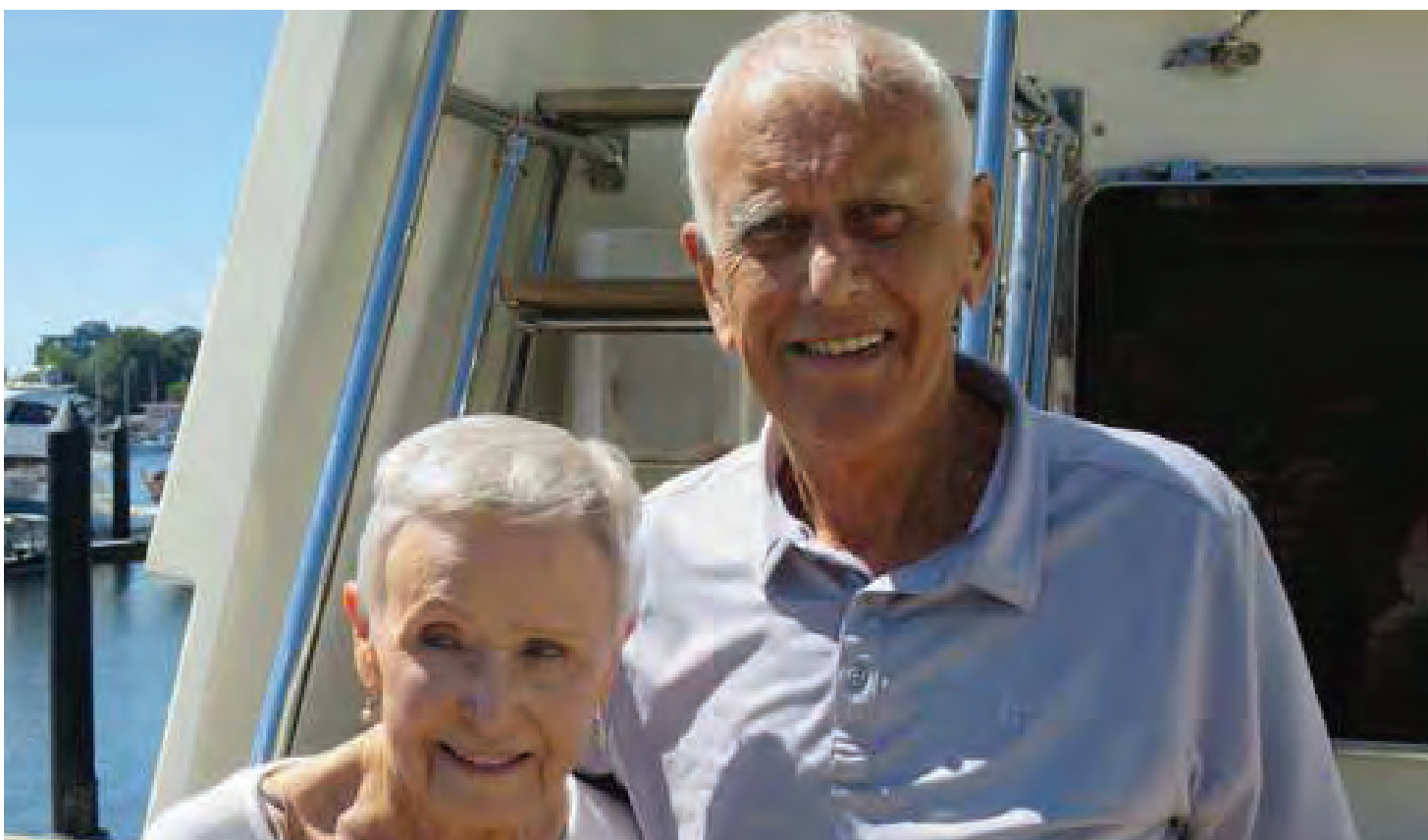
“Craig has given his utmost into ensuring his company consistently provides a high standard of service in what many would consider an isolated part of the province.” – Ben Robinson, Director and CEO, Kitasoo Development Corporation, Klemtu, B.C.

In 1952, a boat repair service operation was established and in 1956 a bulk oil service station was added to complement the marina development.

In 1965, Andrew Widsten aided building the Millbank Industries Cannery on the

from the Canadian Federal Government. The assets initially included: approximately 20 acres of developed waterfront

Widsten's Shearwater properties and wharf at Shearwater. Soon after, the cannery and property was sold to the



**LEFT**  
*Craig and Elaine Widsten, have been married for 66 years.*

Central Native Fishermen's Cooperative, which ceased operations in 1983. In 2018, after numerous owners, the cannery property was sold to Bridgeview Marine Ltd of Delta BC and they established a vessel storage and repair business. Then in 2021, Bridgeview formed a new company, Central Coast Marine Services Ltd, and bought Shearwater's freight and tug and barge marine business.

In 1964, after working for seven years in the family business, Craig Widsten attended BCIT and graduated with honours in 1966. In 1967 Craig formed Shearwater Marine Limited and purchased the assets of his father's company and subsequently purchased the remaining 55 acres of RCAF property from the other two original purchasers.

In 1969, by donating land to the BC Hydro & Power Authority, Widsten facilitated the early development of a central power supply system for the entire Bella Bella area.

In 1968 Craig established a new marine hardware store at Shearwater and in 1969 a fiberglass boat building business for the commercial fishing industry and later yachts to meet the tourism demand. The construction of a hotel was started in

1972 and the additional traffic required the upgrading of all other facilities, including floats and docks for fishermen and improved shipyard, marina and on-shore facilities and services.

Under the direction of Craig, Shearwater was expanded and diversified to serve the isolated community better. Public facilities were developed, including a new community school, airport, BC Ferry terminal and other services required by the area's fishing and logging industries, commercial vessel traffic, tourism and the local population. Through diversification, Widsten ensured Shearwater remained viable through the years. Shearwater had a year around

“Despite being the only Bar and Restaurant for 80 miles which had burnt to the ground, within two days Craig was able to continue the supply of food and libations to the local population at his new Bar and Grill, The Fire Escape.” – Doug Sharkey, Resident of Denny Island (former BC Tel Representative for the area)

Under the direction of Craig, Shearwater was expanded and diversified to serve the isolated community better. Public facilities were developed, including a new community school, airport, BC Ferry terminal and other services required by the area's fishing and logging industries, commercial vessel traffic, tourism and the local population.



**LEFT**  
*The Heiltsuk Nation, purchased the Shearwater Resort and Marina in 2021. It was an agreement that solidified Craig's Shearwater and Denny Island legacy as one of accomplishment, cooperation and then reconciliation*

revenue stream independent of resource industry connections. With permanent employees and residents, a post office, grocery store, liquor store, a Sears outlet, laundromat and retail shops, RV park, fire hall and licensed landfill site were built despite being privately owned and operated and never receiving a government grant or subsidy. A community hall was also constructed on property donated by Shearwater to the Denny Island community and financed by the regional government.

Shearwater is now a full-service destination way-point, tourist center and gateway to the “Great Bear Rain Forest” on the BC Central Coast. On 70 acres of land (approximately one mile of protected shoreline and a seven-acre undeveloped island). Shearwater features a harbour and marina, hotel, restaurant, shipyard, sports fishing infrastructure, fuel station, ferry terminal and various waterfront facilities. For the past 70 years, Shearwater has provided marine facilities and services

for commercial and pleasure craft. It has grown the tourist market through its sport fishing, eco-tours and marina operations, employing 70 full-time staff and an additional 50 personnel during the tourist season.

This is the story of Craig, a true entrepreneur and risk-taker who, during the past 54 years, has developed this remote coastal business/community through sheer determination, perseverance and optimism.

Craig has engaged the company in many different pursuits, but each endeavour was designed to strengthen the business while creating a comfortable, pleasant community for staff and their families. Shearwater’s business model has been one of diversification, self-sufficiency and survival. During the past 54 years, there has been no support group, safety net, mentor and no government assistance. Craig has relied on a

devoted wife, supportive children and grandchildren and assembled a dedicated staff over the years who have respected his determination, bought into the Shearwater vision and cared about the company’s and community’s future.

This is how Shearwater arose despite sometimes rocky relationships with lenders, the Federal Government, and initially with the local First Nation community. However, a testament to the respectful relationship that has existed for decades between Shearwater and the Heiltsuk Nation is their purchase of the Shearwater Resort and Marina in 2021 (the purchase represents the nation’s most significant investment in economic development to date and includes the reclamation of 63 acres of waterfront property and the transfer of a dozen businesses) which solidified the Widsten’s Shearwater and Denny Island legacy as one of accomplishment, cooperation and then reconciliation ■

“I am pleased that Craig is being recognized not only for his entrepreneurial success but also his relationship between the various communities of the Central Coast Region. He has been able to operate in a cross cultural manner to the benefit of all communities over five decades ... Craig has supported many sports events, contributed to many Bella Bella sports teams, and contributed to ocean going canoe initiatives. This included the expedition from Bella Bella to Vancouver for Expo 86 which sparked the resurgence of ocean going canoe voyages on the west coast. In closing, it is a tribute how Craig has helped sustain so many families in the Central Coast Region of British Columbia.” – Frank Brown, Director, Heiltsuk Integrated Resource Management Department (“HIRMD”)

# 54 YEARS

SUPPORTING THE HEILTSUK FIRST NATION COMMUNITY OF BELLA BELLA AND  
ESTABLISHING AN ENDURING, RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP





In 2007, Shearwater approached Ross Wilson and the Heiltsuk Council to join Shearwater to legally challenge BC Hydro to remove the local Zone 2 diesel power rates, reaching as high as .22 per kWh. The challenge was based on the premise that the communities were receiving hydro-electric power from Ocean Falls, a former government facility and that charging our communities diesel rates was a discriminatory action by BC Hydro. After prolonged BCUC hearings, the Shearwater/Heiltsuk group succeeded. The communities received Zone 1 rates, saving approximately \$500,000 per year for the Heiltsuk Community and \$60,000 per year for Shearwater.

Free water taxi use and support to challenge the Government's proposed 2017 commercial herring fishery in Heiltsuk territory.

Numerous reduced water taxi services for special occasions to Prince Rupert, Bella Coola, Alert Bay, Rivers Inlet, Hakai Beach and Klemtu.

Write numerous letters of support to the Government for the Heiltsuk SOK fishery.

A permanent gift to provide a free water taxi service to grieving Heiltsuk family members wishing to attend the

community graveyard on Meadow Island.

Rebuild canoes free of charge for Canoe Journey Expo 86 and various other canoe repair assistance. (see below)

Provided free water taxi service to Namu for the repatriation event (Chief Harvey)

In 2012, despite many saying it couldn't be done, Craig decided to try digging a well to improve the water quality for his restaurant, the community and boaters coming through Shearwater. He hired a company from Vancouver Island, and their first attempt struck an artesian water supply which is now servicing the businesses of Shearwater, tourists, and a station for all the community to come and get quality drinking water.

A major development in 1996 for the community of Denny Island and Shearwater was the installation of the BC Ferry terminal and connecting roll on roll-off ferry service to Port Hardy and Bella Coola, providing convenience and opportunity. Craig provided a free lease of the property to BC Ferries allowing this to happen.

In 2010 Craig donated the land and the equipment required to build Denny Island's Community Hall, which provides recreational activity for the residents and elementary school.

Craig leased Crown land a kilometre from the Shearwater community and operated an approved landfill site to dispose of community garbage and waste without government assistance. This facility is also available to and used by all Denny Island residents and businesses.



## COMMUNITY DONATIONS

### CASH DONATIONS TO VARIOUS EVENTS OVER THE YEARS

- In 2017 Craig established the Widsten Family Foundation via the Charitable Impact Foundation (Canada) and deposited \$700,000. The purpose of the foundation is to give back and recognize the local communities that supported Shearwater over the years and to assist local families in need.
- As an alumnus of the British Columbia Institute of Technology, Craig is currently discussing the establishment of an annual bursary fund to assist deserving First Nation students to acquire an education in a vocation of their choice at BCIT.
- Craig is also considering funding a fish hatchery program in the Central Coast area to help restore wild salmon returns, which will be of great benefit to all local communities.
- Elders to New York to visit museum \$1,000
- Canoe festivals (2) \$10,000
- All native tournament annual minimum donation of \$1,000
- Clifford Star to Australian Basketball Tournament \$1,000
- Education assistance for Harvey's daughter
- Girls Basketball team to Hawaii
- Heiltsuk Social Development, Empty Stocking Fund \$1,000
- Heiltsuk Health Centre, Elders Program \$1,000
- Junior girls and boys' basketball tournaments \$1,000 annual
- Logs from Bella Coola for Heiltsuk Big House \$20,000
- Crane service and other donations to Big House \$10,000
- United in History, Mural celebration
- United in History, RCAF recognition of First Nation Vets
- Heiltsuk store fire, donations for free freight service from Vancouver, etc.
- The annual Pacific Coastal and Shearwater-sponsored event for disadvantaged Heiltsuk families.
- In 2009, Shearwater purchased the 40-person passenger vessel "Clowhom Spirit." It approached HEDC with a proposal to establish a Joint Venture Shearwater/Heiltsuk water taxi business to service the communities and outposts of the Central Coast. Unfortunately, HEDC was going through a transition exercise involving recruiting a new CEO and could not entertain any proposals.
- Bursary fund provided to the Bella Bella School \$10,000
- Donation to the Shearwater Elementary School to buy equipment \$3,000
- Donation to the Lions Gate Hospital Foundation \$2,000

“Shearwater Marine has been very supportive of Shearwater Elementary School in terms of use of company facilities, attracting students, subsidized water taxi services for students in remote communities, and ensuring the school has appropriate services in place.” – Jerry Smit, Superintendent Secretary Treasurer, Central Coast School District (retired)

# 1969

## 1969 BC HYDRO INSTALLATION RATE REDUCTION



**W**hen Craig Widsten purchased Widsten Marine Services Ltd. from his father in 1967, the communities of Denny Island and Bella Bella on Campbell Island had no government sponsored electricity. Each community, business and homeowner had to provide their own electricity through independent or personal diesel generation. Shearwater itself had a generator that only operated 18 hours per day, shutting off each night at 11pm.

With an ambitious future ahead of him, Craig took on his first community project: to work with the Heiltsuk First Nation community of Bella Bella to lobby BC Hydro to install an integrated diesel generating system, including an underwater cable to connect both islands.

It took several years of political persistence and cooperation between the two communities to convince BC Hydro and the BC Government to move forward on the project.

In 1969, BC Hydro approved installation

of the diesel generating plant and four full-time operators and their families. The multi-million-dollar diesel-generating system serviced Campbell Island (Bella Bella) and Denny Island (Shearwater). Shearwater Marine donated property to BC Hydro to establish their power plant at

of province-wide power rates. Instead, it began charging a higher-priced “Zone 2” rate for diesel-generating communities that were not connected to the provincial power grid system. This meant that commercial users in the Shearwater and Bella Bella communities were paying as

In 2006, Craig successfully convinced the Heiltsuk Tribal Council to join forces with Shearwater to collectively challenge BC Hydro.

Shearwater, which included a tank farm and homes for four full-time operators and their families.

The development was a significant achievement for the isolated communities and marked the beginning of a remarkable evolution as it helped to establish Shearwater as an essential local entity.

In the 1970s, the province of BC abandoned Premier W.A.C. Bennett’s policy

high as 22 cents per kilowatt-hour, compared with 6 cents per kWh for the rest of the mainland province—nearly four times the rate.

Craig lobbied BC Hydro for years to reduce the rate for the isolated communities, to no avail. And then, in 1987, the pulp mill and coastal community of nearby Ocean Falls was permanently closed, and its major hydroelectric plant was put up for sale. The provincial government sold



**LEFT**  
*Ocean Falls was permanently closed and its major hydro electric plant was put up for sale.*

**RIGHT**

*BC Hydro's  
Transmission Yard  
and Fuel Depot  
near Shearwater on  
Denny Island.*



“Bella Bella benefited greatly from the rate changes. They [Bella Bella] had a big power bill, and industries such as the Heiltsuk fish plant saved much money on power. I received many letters from people, saying “thank you very much” because the people also saved on residential power rates.” .

the Ocean Falls power plant to an independent contractor who installed a transmission line and then contracted to sell power to BC Hydro to service the communities at Bella Bella and Shearwater. BC Hydro laid off most of its operators. It was able to shut down diesel operations effectively, only maintaining a standby diesel plant for emergency purposes, which continues to this day.

Connected to the primary provincial power grid, the isolated communities now had more reliable electricity, but despite receiving power from a formerly government-owned facility, Shearwater and Bella Bella were still subject to the grossly inflated Zone 2 costs. The inability of these communities to access this excess power from BC Hydro at a fair rate stifled economic growth for years.

In 2006, Craig successfully convinced the Heiltsuk Tribal Council to join forces with Shearwater to challenge BC Hydro on this issue collectively. It took two years of meetings, bureaucratic roadblocks,

challenges and a formal, prolonged BC Utilities Commission hearing, but Craig and the Heiltsuk council with the help of a brilliant, knowledgeable lawyer, Fred Weisberg, successfully obtained Zone 1 rates for the Bella Bella district in early 2008. This favourable decision resulted in staggering savings. Shearwater Marine saw their annual energy costs drop by \$60,000, and the Bella Bella Heiltsuk community—home to just under 1,200 people as of the 2021 census—saw their prices drop by over \$500,000 per year. The decision to instate Zone 1 costs for the Bella Bella district also led to BC Hydro eliminating Zone 2 rates for all affected communities throughout the province, easing financial pressure off countless families and removing a key impediment to future economic growth for so many small communities.

“Bella Bella benefited greatly from the rate changes. They [Bella Bella] had a big power bill, and industries such as the Heiltsuk fish plant saved much money on power. I received many letters from people, saying “thank you very much” because the people also saved on residential power rates.” ■



1970 -  
1985

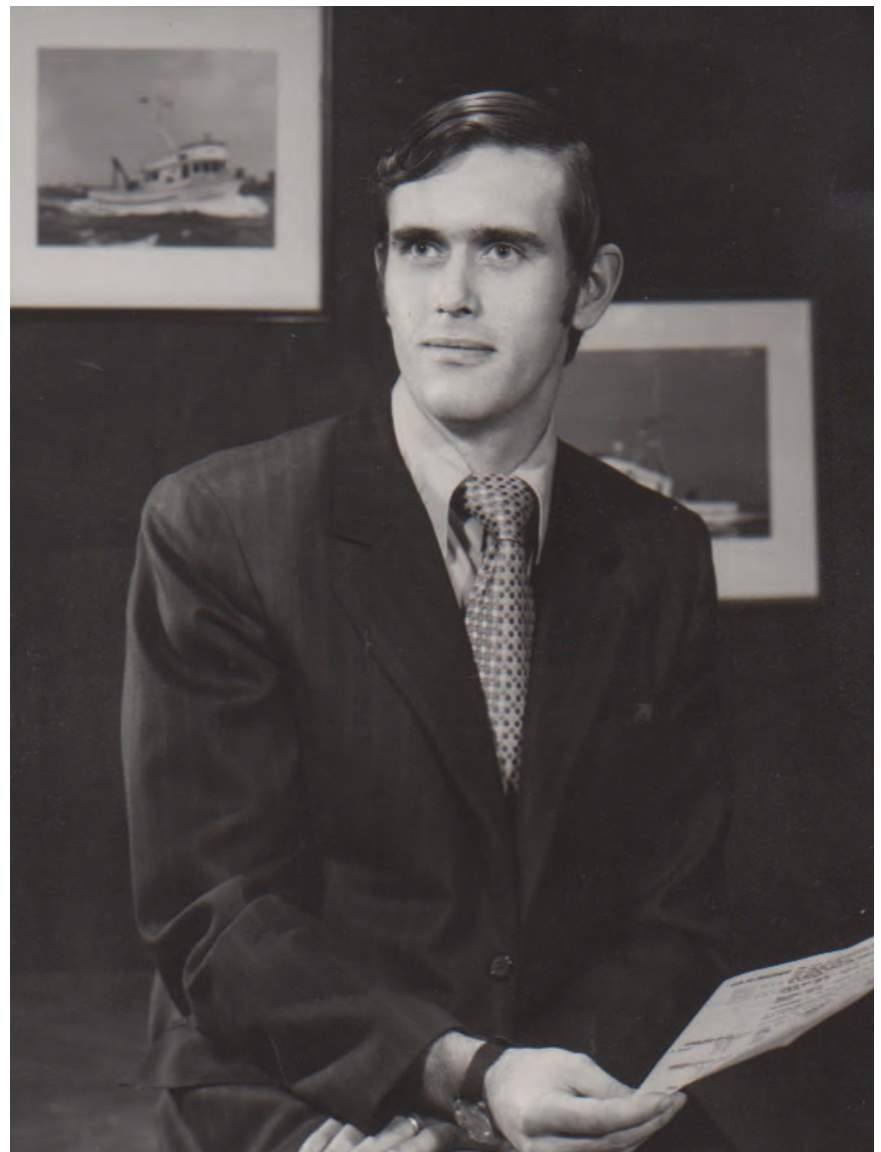
BOAT BUILDING ON SHEARWATER

**W**ITH AN AMBITIOUS list of improvements in mind, Craig established a marine hardware store in 1968 to service the shipyard, fishermen and the local area. Shortly thereafter hired Victor Gooldrup from the Sunshine Coast to work as shipyard manager.

Victor was a well-known and talented self-taught boat builder and architect and had previously built water taxis and crew boats for the logging industry. Craig and Victor worked together to build a gillnetter vessel—the Rhya Yvonne, still operational today—for a local First Nations fisherman. When they realized there was also a demand from the local fish cannery for fish packer vessels, the pair conspired to develop a plywood mould to build 60-foot fibreglass vessels at Shearwater, something that had never before been done on the West Coast.

The former RCAF hangar was converted into a ship-building facility, and two vessels—the *Northern Princess* and the *Pacific Reefer*—quickly came off the line.

“I think that my aim was to develop something that involved manufacturing and was not a seasonal business, where I could employ local people,” explains Craig. “So we discussed the idea of building fibreglass boats. The cannery next door needed a couple of fish packers, so we decided to take the contract. We were sort of pioneers when it came to building large fibreglass vessels, but we plowed ahead and were able to develop those molds, and we built the *Northern Princess* and *Pacific Reefer*.”



The *Northern Princess* and her sister ship, *Pacific Reefer*, were powered with 240 horsepower Caterpillar diesel which gave them 10 knots when loaded and were enthusiastically endorsed by their owners.

State-of-the-art with innovative design and function, the two



**ABOVE RIGHT**  
At 29, Craig purchased the family business in 1967 and started building fibreglass vessels for the fishing industry.

**LEFT**  
Craig established a marine hardware store in 1968 to service the shipyard, fishermen and the local area.

ships were the largest built in Canada at the time. Each could carry 100,000 pounds of salmon in four brine tanks, with an additional 20,000 pounds in a dry tank. Powered by 240-horsepower Caterpillar diesel engines, the ships could run at 10 knots when loaded and remained remarkably manoeuvrable, able to be turned into almost their own length. A walkthrough tunnel ran the centre line, providing easy access to all electrical and piping systems without sacrificing carrying capacity, as the vessels were lighter and already able to carry more than others of a similar size.

The vessels could carry 2,200 gallons of diesel and 2,300 gallons of water, making them suitable for offshore oceanographic work. The chilled brine tanks kept the fish in better condition, with smaller tanks minimizing scaling.

Designed to produce the vessels for a broad market, each hull could be cast in approximately 15 days with 12 workers (not including bulkheads and beam shelves) and were appraised at \$150,000 each.

Building large fibreglass vessels was new to the Department of Transport at the time. So Craig and Victor worked very closely with them to establish a safe, stable and approved certified fibreglass vessel for the fishing industry, to great success.

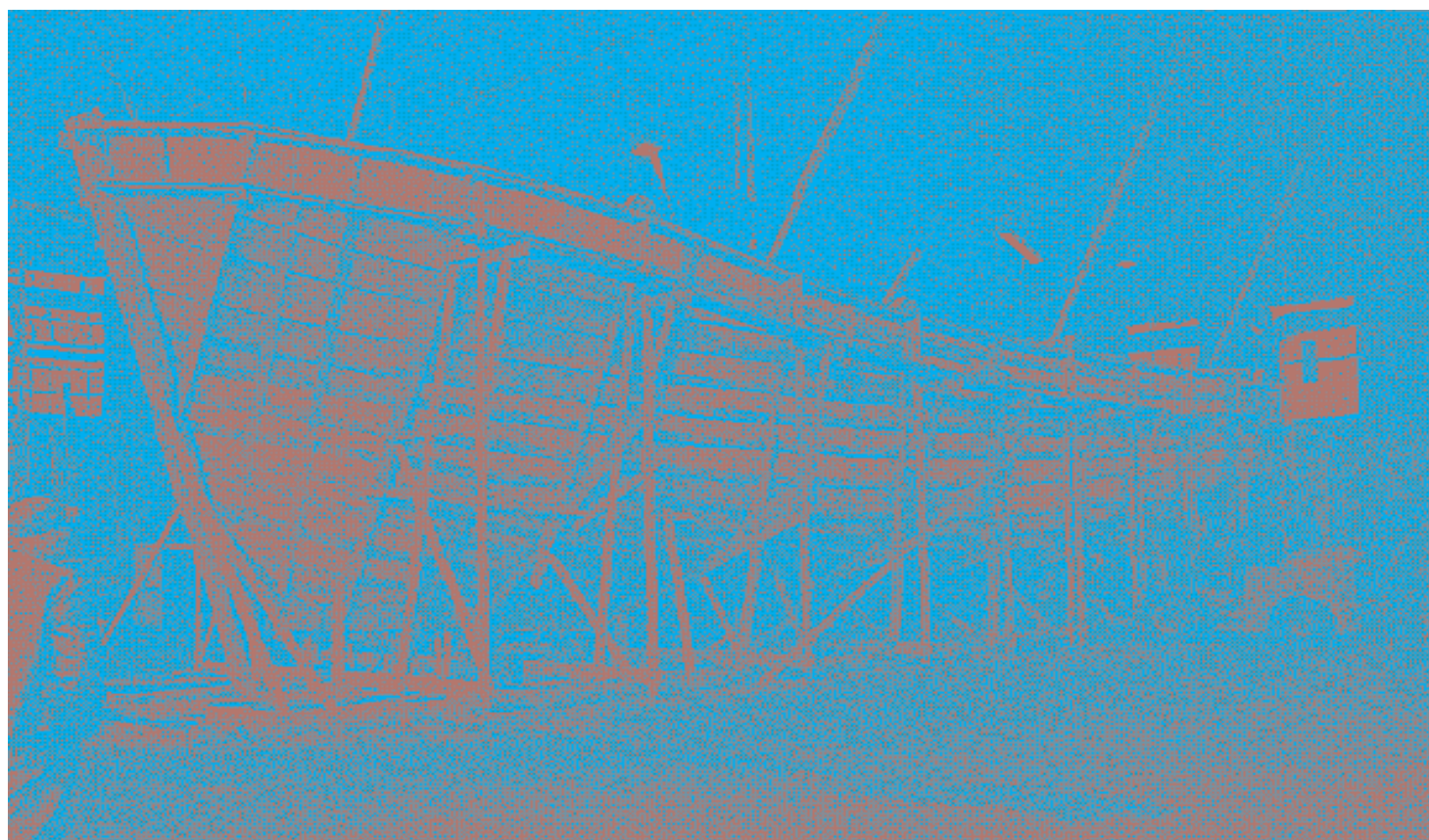
In a 1970 issue of *BC Boating*, writer Don Tyrell described the interior of the *Northern Princess* as “more like a luxury yacht than a commercial vessel...[with] burnt orange shag rugs, panelling of dark warm wood and a black leather settee...”

After their first season, Craig wrote to local cannery Millbanke Industries requesting a candid review of the vessels' performances. He received a very positive response from the cannery manager W.E. Sedgwick in November of 1970, stating, “In terms of value and workmanship, I believe they would be tough to beat.” The two vessels “packed a sizable poundage of fish for a lot of distance and time and can fairly be said to have worked out even better than expected.” The owners of Millbanke were “very satisfied with the sea-worthiness in rough weather and the trouble-free and economical operation during the past season.”

Despite the vessels' success, the operation's financial viability quickly became under stress, mainly due to the costs of bringing in materials and skilled labour to such a remote location.

In March of 1970, when the boat-building enterprise was still trying to find steady ground, Craig and the company became aware that the Heiltsuk First Nation Band in the Bella Bella community was planning to establish an independent shipyard through the Indian Fishermen's Assistance Grant. As the First Nations' shipyard would provide direct competition to the operations at Shearwater, Craig approached the government with requests for financial assistance because Shearwater hugely supported the local economy and was the major independent local employer—including employing 10 Heiltsuk locals—in a community that had 70 percent unemployment.

In October of 1970, Craig also wrote to Cecil Reid, then Heiltsuk Chief Councillor and Band Manager, requesting written support from Cecil and the Council to confirm the role that Shearwater



**LEFT**  
*Exterior view of 58' split type mold developed by Shearwater Marine in 1969. Believed to be the largest mold of its type in Canada.*



played in the Bella Bella economy, stating that if no government assistance was offered, Shearwater would be forced to move its moulds and operations to Vancouver. He also offered to sell or lease Shearwater's existing facilities to the Band on the premise that there was no need for two directly competitive shipyards in such a small space.

In early November 1970, the offer to buy or lease Shearwater's facilities was rejected by the Heiltsuk council with plans going ahead for the community's own reserve-based shore installation.

"When we started the boat building business, unemployment in the area was over 70%, explains Craig. "We hired many First Nations people and trained them to build fibreglass boats, and the workmanship and quality were excellent."

"Many of the residents from the village have been over lately

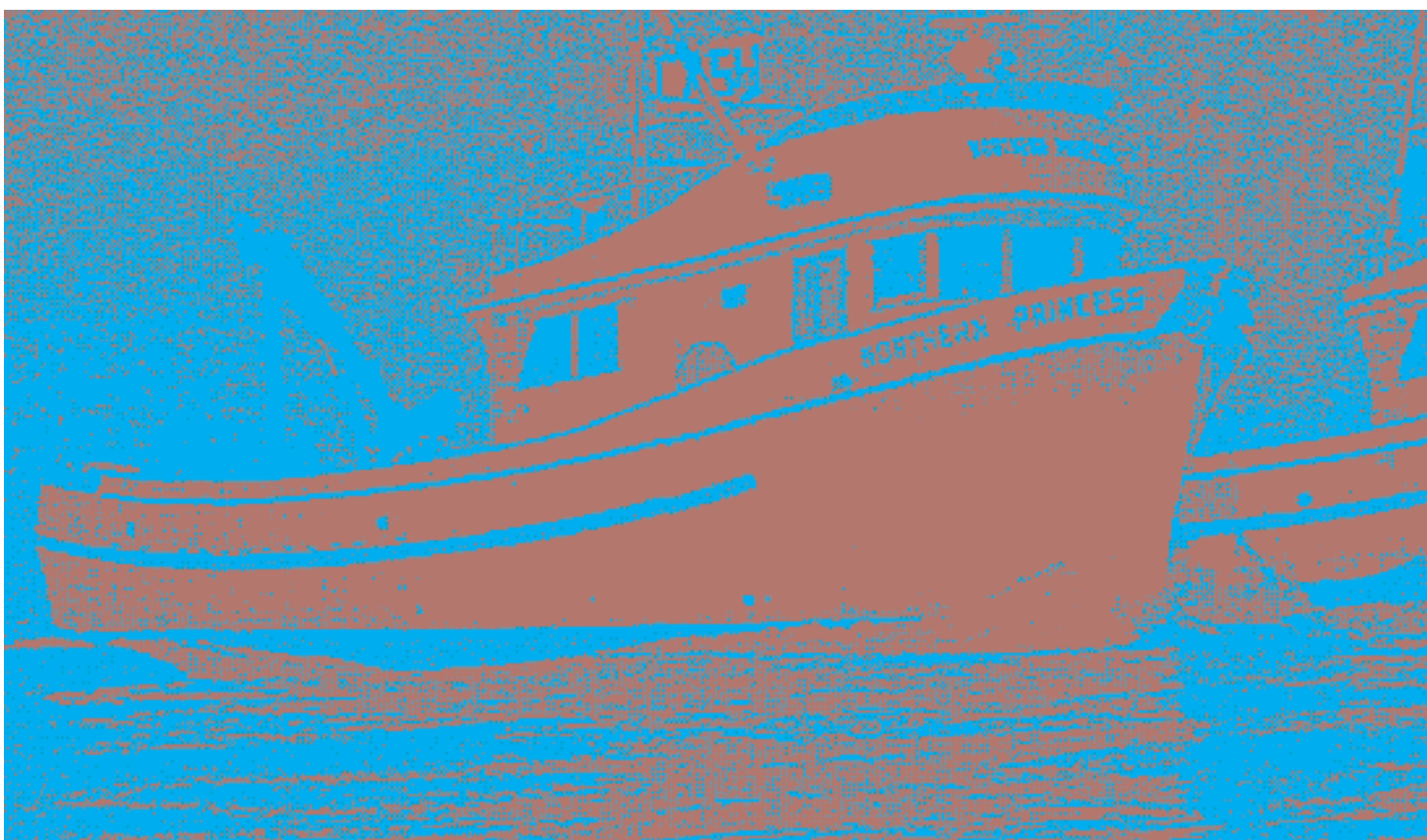
inquiring about work, hopeful that we would be building more fiberglass boats, we have given many indirect answers. The truth of the matter is I do not feel we can continue building

these boats in Bella Bella without financial assistance from the government.

"There is no question that the vessel design and construction has proven most successful. There is much interest from all quarters of the boating industry, and we have firm orders pending now. However, in ana-

lyzing our costs on the first two boats, we find the expense of maintaining skilled labour in Bella Bella and freight costs prohibitive. As you know, we hired about ten men from the village for the fibreglass work and found them very adaptable to the trade. The minimum rate paid to the local residents was \$3.00 per hour. However, we had to pay as high as \$6.00 an hour to attract tradesmen out of Vancouver, plus the cost of transportation, and accommodation.

Craig He received a very positive reviews regarding the the *Northern Princess*. "In terms of value and workmanship, I believe they would be tough to beat." The two vessels "packed a sizable poundage of fish for a lot of distance and time and can fairly be said to have worked out even better than expected."



LEFT  
*The Northern Princess*

“In view of the welfare situation in Bella Bella, it seems ironic that companies building fibreglass boats in the interior (some being subsidiary American companies) are receiving government grants, loans, tax relief, etc., yet Bella Bella does not come under their particular terms of reference.”

Despite this setback, Shearwater continued to move ahead and, in 1971, launched the maiden voyage of a third vessel: *Bripak* (named for *Brine Packer*). Built in Bella Bella by Shearwater

Marine, the ship was also designed by Victor Gooldrup, and it was owned by a syndicate of five young men, including Craig. Reaching 62 feet long, *Bripak* broke the record for Canada’s largest fibreglass fishing vessel and was designed as a

combination for halibut longlining, tuna and salmon packing. Laid out a little differently than *Northern Princess* and *Pacific Reefer*, *Bripak* had two large main tanks in the hold for filling and one smaller tank for holding halibut bait and as an experiment in packing halibut in brine. The total hold capacity was 140,000 pounds of iced halibut, including all the halibut gear,

which was valued at around \$180,000.

It was also “the first boat to hit the water with the benefit of the new 35 percent federal subsidy,” according to a May 1971 issue of *Western Fisheries*, meaning the federal government would provide the purchaser 35 percent of the cost, or about \$63,000, with the remainder financed through the Industrial Development Bank. Unfortunately Shearwater’s boat building operation did not benefit directly from this subsidy.

“When we started the boat building business, unemployment in the area was over 70%, explains Craig. “We hired many First Nations people and trained them to build fibreglass boats, and the workmanship and quality were excellent.”

Though *Bripak* performed as well as the last two vessels to come out of Shearwater, it was around this time that Craig stated that any future boats would likely be built in Richmond or Steveston, due to the construction costs and the

local shipyard competition.

With no financial assistance or reprieve from the federal or provincial governments to take the pressure off Shearwater’s operating costs, the operation moved their moulds and business to the Victoria Machinery Depot on Vancouver Island,



**LEFT**  
*Heiltsuk First Nation Band members help lay up fiberglass shell for the first two vessels launched by Shearwater Marine in 1970,*

along with master builder Victor Gooldrup. Victor would go on to build another ten vessels using the Shearwater mould—which Craig received royalties for—and the Gooldrup family subsequently made their own fibreglass moulds and became famous in British Columbia as boat builders, building many vessels up to 80 feet in length.

Craig eventually sold his mould to the Uniflight Corporation in Washington State, where it was intended to build more vessels for the Alaska Fishery. Unfortunately, the mould was destroyed in a major fire.

Shearwater Marine stepped back from boat building until 1985, when a government-sponsored program was introduced to encourage yacht production, offering generous tax advantages for purchasers. Okanagan-based company Three Buoys Houseboat Vacations built a series of yachts and pleasure craft as a basis for their vacation rental company through this subsidy program, and Craig planned to build a similar vessel rental program for the Central Coast with a safe, economical and straightforward to operate West Coast type vessel. Shearwater designed and developed a new fiberglass hull mold and various superstructure molds to construct the yacht *M/V Pacific Lure* with mass production in mind. Still, as the ship neared completion, the government subsidy program was cancelled, which made the proposed program financially impossible. Instead, *M/V Pacific Lure*, the first yacht built, became Shearwater Marine's flagship for the company's burgeoning sport fishing and eco-tourism ventures. ■



LEFT  
*SHEARWATER 43,*  
*Fiberglass Sports*  
*Cruiser*

# 1973

HOTELS AND RESORT



**W**hen Shearwater's boat-building business was officially closed in 1971, Craig Widsten was forced to pivot operations. An alternate business opportunity was researched to diversify the business and ensure cash flow.

With no restaurants, hotels, or drinking establishments in the Bella Bella and Denny Island community, Craig took a leap of faith. He applied for a liquor license to start a cabaret in the former RCAF storage building that also housed the hardware store. The business was an instant success and became a focal point for the local communities and fishing industry, which through demand, was expanded into a full-service restaurant. A hotel liquor license was applied for in 1974, which required the construction of

24 ensuite rooms to meet the regulations. Craig applied for and received financing for the project from the Federal Business Development Bank, and the "Fishermen's

Federal Business Development Bank to serve the company with a legal foreclosure notice.

Community members were alarmed by

The Inn also served as a meeting place for the residents. It was a major contributor to the local economy, employing over 15 people and producing significant local revenue.

Inn Hotel" began to take form. However, in 1975, the federal government agreed to finance a new hotel for the Heiltsuk community, which contributed to Shearwater's financial problems and caused the

the news that the Fishermen's Inn Hotel may not be built. This led to some community members writing letters to the federal government supporting Craig's hotel project.



**LEFT**  
*The Fishermen's Inn, pub side, is a popular destination and a big employer and contributor to the local economy.*

J.A. Pearsall, M.P., for the Coast Chilcotin constituency, also intervened, writing an impassioned letter to the FBDB on behalf of Craig and Shearwater, "We have recently been informed of the action taken by the Federal business development Bank against Shearwater Marine limited, and as our federal government representative, we urgently request you seriously review this situation. This action threatens our livelihood, educational standards and our community, and all the much-needed services provided for the B.C. fishing industry and the many tourists who frequent the Central Coast area. Bella Bella, halfway between Vancouver and Prince Rupert, is an essential port for coastal British Columbia.

The provincial government has allotted Crown lands for those wishing to build permanent residences in this area. Most of the lots have been leased and building

has commenced. Residents with children will have to seek further for a school, for it will mean the closing of the Shearwater School and the only recreational facility enjoyed by this community.

Denny Island residents have put much effort into building a decent community with a good standard of living for all in the face of the higher cost of living for all, in the face of excessive freight rates, etc. and no government assistance.

Shearwater Marine Limited has been the major contributing factor to this development, and now all is threatened.

We are very concerned and request that you consider this urgent matter."

After a period of receivership, an out-of-court settlement was arranged with FBDB. Completing Shearwater's Fishermen's

Inn Hotel became a slow process for many years, but was basically completed and fully operational by 1990.

With the addition of the Inn, tourists, namely sport fishermen, flocked to Shearwater each year. It was a favourite stop for commercial fishermen, featuring facilities such as a pub, restaurant laundry room, showers and other amenities.

The Inn also served as a meeting place for the residents. It was a major contributor to the local economy, employing over 15 people and producing significant local revenue.

Unfortunately, on April 8, 1992, Shearwater's Fishermen's Inn and the Hardware Store, which was located in the south end of the same building, were totally destroyed by fire. According to



LEFT  
*Shearwater Lodge  
fireplace*



**TOP**  
*The original Fishermen's Inn*

news reports, the fire broke out at 3:10 a.m. and burned quickly, levelling the 22-room inn and store in just a few hours. The blaze was believed to have started from a cigarette.

Shearwater did not have an official fire-fighting team or the equipment required to contain a fire of this size. However, it is a community in the truest

sense of the word, and no one just stood by and watched the fire. Resident Cyril Carpenter used his "Back Eddy" boat to bring volunteer firefighters from nearby Bella Bella equipped with pumps, hoses and proper fire-resistant suits.

Craig was on the Lower Mainland the night of the fire. He received a phone call from his daughter Tracy, who told him the hotel had caught fire.

"We were just finishing up the hotel, the interior was almost complete, and landscaping was almost done," remembers Craig.

"It was a devastating time, the loss of life, the total loss of our hotel along with precious Indian art and carvings from local artists."

Craig also says the intensity of the fire

that dock at Shearwater.

Craig says the traumatic episode brought the community together: "Cyril Carpenter and his boat, the "Back Eddy," brought help from Bella Bella when we had a fire

and then years later, when the Heiltsuk general store caught on fire in Bella Bella, we went over and helped them fight their fire."

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**AFTER THE FIRE**

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Craig immediately committed to rebuilding the Fishermen's Inn and the hardware store was relocated to the front of the hanger building: "Failure was not an option, too many people depended on me, I relocated families to the island who were dedicated to the vision, I could not let the company fail, the community depended on me."

However, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce called Shearwater's operating line of credit, demanding payment from the fire insurance proceeds. Despite this setback, Craig moved forward.

Craig was on the Lower Mainland the night of the fire. He received a phone call from his daughter Tracy, who told him the hotel had a fire.

was so great that other Shearwater structures were in jeopardy: "Rivets on the outside wall of the hangar melted off. We were lucky the fire was contained. It was so devastating that all that remained standing [of the hotel] was the fireplace."

A *Thunderbird Newspaper* account of the fire described the tragedy, material loss and community response:

"One man is dead following a fire at the Fisherman's Inn at Shearwater on April 8th. The victim, identified as Robert Lawrence Knapp, 48, of Esquimalt, was a skipper aboard one of the many boats

Craig sourced and purchased two used, two-story housing units, which included 16 four-bedroom modular units.

“I went to Revelstoke, and I found a company up there that had two-story buildings. Each building had eight 12x54 modular units, and each room had its own bathroom. I got some contractors to truck them to

Bella Coola and used our tug and barge to deliver them to Shearwater.”

The modular units on the Shearwater waterfront provided temporary accommodation for the 1992 fishing season.

Years later, eight modular units were relocated on the Shearwater waterfront and again double stacked with 28 rooms, a lobby entrance, an office and a man-

ager’s suite, providing Shearwater with a permanent hotel complex. The other eight units were located at an alternate site for staff accommodation.

A temporary restaurant was also

established in the main hangar building. The “Fire Escape” restaurant remained in operation until the completion of the new waterfront restaurant.

The new waterfront social complex, the Fishermen’s Bar and Grill, was opened in 1995 and included a 125-seat pub, 60-seat restaurant, large upstairs lounge/activity room,

managers suite and a 60-seat outdoor waterfront patio. It was the only restaurant facility in the region. It became a hub of activity and an entertainment center for the residents, commercial fishermen and transient marina yacht traffic, which

The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce called Shearwater’s operating line of credit, demanding payment from the fire insurance proceeds. Despite this setback, Craig moved forward.



**LEFT**  
*The “Big Time Sportfishing Resort” declared bankruptcy and assets were auctioned off in Nanaimo. Craig purchased the fully outfitted 20-room lodge for \$225,000 and moved it to Shearwater.*



remains a popular destination today.

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## FISHING RESORT TAKES FORM

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In 2010, owners of the five-year-old, multimillion-dollar floating “Big Time Sportfishing Resort” declared bankruptcy and their assets were auctioned off in Nanaimo. Craig purchased the fully outfitted 20-room lodge for \$225,000. Unfortunately, the lodge was constructed on a deteriorating steel barge and was in danger of sinking, so the resort had to be moved off the barge, which presented a costly challenge.

Craig had it towed to Shearwater, cleared

a waterfront site and placed the barge ashore. Fortunately, the barge had a substantial reinforced concrete deck, and once set in place, workers could enter the barge and install numerous steel piling to support the deck. This was a very successful project that Craig and Shearwater

Nestled along the water’s edge, Shearwater’s luxurious lodge is designed for those seeking adventure, relaxation and comfort—catering to a wide range of guests, from sports fishing to eco-tourism enthusiasts to corporate groups, families and friends. Visitors are greeted by

the warm ambience of rustic cedar interiors, a river rock floor to ceiling fire place, wet bar, custom lounge and a fantastic waterfront view. Perfect for unwinding after a

long day on the water. The lodge also boasts an upscale private dining lounge and executive chef.

The Lodge was a hub of activity during the summer, as guests set out on charter and

The hotel, restaurant and inn are major employers and economic generators for the region.

staff entirely engineered, and in 2011 the new waterfront lodge became the proud home of Shearwater’s sport fishing and eco-tourism operations.

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## GLOBAL PRESTIGE

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### LEFT

*The “Big Time Sportfishing Resort” on its deteriorating steel barge.*

rental boats to explore nearby fishing and wildlife viewing areas. As the day drew to a close, the boats returned to the marina, filled with joyful anglers, beaming with pride over their catches and memories of the stunning wildlife they encountered.

For those seeking to stock up on supplies, the extensive resort facilities offer various services and amenities, including a general store, a supermarket, a marine store, a delightful coffee bar, and a deli named the Hodge Podge. This charming café features an extension displaying a range of novelties, clothing and other items for sale and offers casual picnic table seating under the shade of tall trees.

The management at the lodge was trained to cater to the needs of every guest, ensuring that your time at the lodge is nothing short of memorable. Whether sipping on a drink at the bar, savouring

a meal at the restaurant or browsing the shelves of the marine store, visitors to this once-isolated island in the Pacific Ocean were sure to find everything they need to make the most of their stay.

Meanwhile, The Cedar Lodge offered a spartan alternative for the more budget-conscious traveller still seeking ocean and wilderness access outside their door. The Cedar Lodge was the perfect accommodation for families or close friends travelling together, with a single bathroom containing a small shower stall accessed between every pair of bedrooms ■



**LEFT**  
*The Shearwater  
Lodge.*

# 1980

DENNY ISLAND AERODROME



In 1967, the Central Coast region of British Columbia had only one airport, located in Bella Coola, 65 miles east of Bella Bella and Shearwater. However, this outer area of the coast was the main corridor for the north-south provincial air traffic. The halfway point on the BC Coast, Bella Bella and Shearwater, had seen its fair share of forced landing incidents from wheeled aircraft due to weather, fuel and mechanical problems. The need for an aircraft landing strip in this remote region was obvious for aircraft safety and to serve the local communities with wheeled aircraft.

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#### TAKING INITIATIVE

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In the absence of government help, a non-profit airport society was formed. The Denny Island Airport Society was open to all residents, including First Nations band members, businessmen, contractors and aviation companies. The society received support from the Central Coast Chamber of Commerce, Central Coast Regional District, B.C. Aviation Council and, in particular, the

independent aviation community. Through contributions, \$750,000.00 was raised in cash, equipment and donated work effort.

Craig Widsten, then secretary of the Denny Island Airport Society, said it is 300 air miles between Port Hardy and Prince Rupert: “we have single-engine wheeled planes going past on the way up to Alaska, and there was no emergency strip to take them if anything goes wrong.”

Despite the obvious need, government funding for the project was not readily available as the terrain for constructing an airport in this region made it very expensive. In the mid-seventies, Shearwater did not operate a fishing resort but entertained corporate friends with fishing trips. Through these relationships, the owners of Quesnel Redi-Mix Ltd of Quesnel BC became close friends of Craig Widsten and the Widsten family and significant partners in constructing the Denny Island Airport.

The provincial government was approached for

**BOTTOM LEFT**  
*Denny Island Aerodrome, previously Bella Bella (Denny Island) Airport (ICAO: CYJQ), is located two nautical miles (3.7 km; 2.3 mi) east of Bella Bella, on Denny Island.*

**BOTTOM RIGHT**  
*Runway approach at Denny Island Aerodrome.*





financial assistance but refused. However, Highways Minister Alex Fraser committed, "If private contractors constructed an emergency runway on Denny

McLeod Crane Service, to participate in the project if Shearwater would provide all barging of equipment and water transportation services, accommodation, and meals for

all the crew and provide fuel for all the equipment.

Bruce McLeod, the owner of Richmond-based McLeod Crane Service and Quesnel Red-Mix worked with Widsten to bring the Denny Island Airport to fruition. "The feds put the cost of an airport at \$3 million," however the

**ABOVE**  
*Willy Douglas after landing the first plane at Denny Island Aerodrome, 1980.*

"There was a real safety need for an airstrip in the Central Coast Region for small aircraft to land. Craig coordinated the efforts taken by many key people involved." – Rollie Back, past Managing Director, Denny Island Airport Society (Shearwater), and member and past Board Chairman of the British Columbia Aviation Council.

Island without government funding and landed a plane, the Provincial Government would improve the facility for commercial use." Craig Widsten convinced Quesnel Red-Mix and another contractor,

private group was able to build a 2,500-foot strip for approximately 1/3 the cost.

This private consortium constructed the initial airstrip



“The feds put the cost of an airport at \$3 million,” Bruce McLeod said, adding that the private group was able to build a 2,500-foot strip for approximately 1/3 the cost.

for approximately \$750,000, and the first plane was landed in the spring of 1980 by Villie Douglas of Air BC, Port Hardy. As agreed, the Provincial Government immediately built an access road to the airport from Shearwater, improved the runway surface and parking area, and paved the facility for commercial use. The Denny Island Airport had finally become a reality due to the determination of Craig Widsten, and partnership between the local community and private contractors. The facility was able to accommodate large-wheeled aircraft and became an integral part of Shearwater’s expanding Sport Fishing and tourism business.

Denny Island Aerodrome (ICAO: CYJQ), is located two nautical miles east of Bella Bella, on Denny Island. This airport has no services or fuel, but the Shearwater marine fuel station is accessible to both helicopters and floatplanes. The runway is limited to day/VFR operations only. ■



1985

SPORT FISHING

**T**he 1980s saw an enormous decline in BC's commercial fishing industry, and with it came uncertainty for Shearwater Marine's future. Shearwater had long been a major fuel supplier and other services, but with commercial boats disappearing from the waters, Craig had to find a way to diversify and look to the tourism industry. The company had previously entertained corporate guests with sport fishing for many years. Still, with the 1985 launch of Shearwater's corporate yacht *Pacific Lure*, the company became seriously involved in this new business venture.

"In the 60s and 70s and part of the '80s, commercial fishing was really the financial backbone of Shearwater. That's what built the business," explains Craig. "We were in a major fishing area, a very productive area, and we decided to begin marketing Shearwater as a sport fishing destination."

Often referred to as the "Gateway to the Great Bear Rainforest," Denny Island and the surrounding area is home to a spectacular array of wildlife—grizzlies, black bears, Sitka deer, bald eagles, humpback whales, orcas, Steller sea lions, Dall's porpoises, Pacific white-sided dolphins and more—but it's also a fisherman's treasure trove.

Shearwater's new venture capitalized on an interest in the region for sport fishing that had been growing since the 1950s, helped along when American celebrities like John Wayne promoted the Hecate Strait as an ideal location to catch "trophy fish." By the 1980s, with the vast array of salmon, halibut, lingcod, rockfish and more, the area offered some of the best sport fishing in the world.

Craig began investing significantly in boats, fishing equipment and supporting infrastructure, and established a marketing department to create and distribute brochures and other advertising. Shearwater representatives attended sports shows throughout Canada and the United States to generate buzz, and it worked. Fishermen began to flock to the area, and the *Pacific Lure* was featured on the cover of the September 1987 issue of *Pacific Yachting* and became Shearwater's sport fishing flagship.

"Our marketing efforts were small at first," explains Craig. "My daughter Kelly began attending trade-shows in the United States, and then we began advertising Shearwater on the radio. Eventually, I hired a full-time sport fishing manager, Mike Pfortmueller, who, over a period of 20 years played a significant role in the development of Shearwater's sport fishing and eco-tourism business."

**BELOW**

*Shearwater and Denny Island is now a popular sport fishing destination, employing many Heiltsuk Nation fishing guides.*







The early to mid-1990s kept Craig busy building—and then rebuilding after a devastating fire—the hotel and lodgings on Denny Island. Still, with the Fishermen’s Bar & Grill construction in 1996, the rebranded Shearwater Resort and Marina’s tourism appeal ramped way up.

The Fishermen’s Bar & Grill included a 60-seat

significant tourist-related industry in the area and the biggest generators of tax revenue within BC’s Central Coast. Shearwater Resort and Marina alone saw approximately 400 guests from all over the world each season, many of whom were repeat customers looking to replicate the singular excitement and experience of fishing the “Salmon Highway.”

**ABOVE LEFT, RIGHT**

*Heiltsuk Nation fishing guides are seasoned professionals, helping direct boats to hot spots while sharing local lore.*

By the 1980s, with the vast array of salmon, halibut, lingcod, rockfish and more, the area offered some of the best sport fishing in the world.

restaurant, a 125-seat pub and a 75-seat private upstairs lounge on the waterfront that could be rented out. With increased capacity for entertaining, the company quickly expanded its sport fishing operations, adding ten new boats in 1997 as well as improved accommodations, increasing from 32 rooms to 48, which included six large suites.

As of the early 2000s, fishing lodges were the most

on fibreglass Hourston runabouts, fully equipped with fishing and foul weather gear. Seasoned guides helped direct boats to hot spots and shared local lore. Shearwater Resort and Marina provided care for all its guests’ catches and could arrange for smoking or canning at St. Jeans Cannery, to be shipped back to guests’ homes.

Guests who came for the all-inclusive packages received full orientation on everything from fishing techniques to boating safety and were guaranteed 10 to 12 hours of fishing each day

Shearwater Resort and Marina were unique in that they employed and benefited the local community in an often insulated industry that only benefited businesses and their direct owners.

The company employed several members from the Heiltsuk community, and Craig made it a point to use Heiltsuk fishing guides, saying in an article by the Heiltsuk Economic Development Corporation in February 2010 that “They are the best fishermen, have great customer service skills and know where the fish are.”

“The First Nations fishing guides we hired played a crucial role and contributed to the success of our sports fishing operation,” explains Craig. “They worked great with sports fishermen, knew the area

exceptionally well and generated a lot of repeat business through their local expertise and sharing their indigenous culture with our guests.”

“The First Nations fishing guides we hired played a crucial role and contributed to the success of our sports fishing operation,” explains Craig. “They worked great with sports fishermen, knew the area exceptionally well and generated a lot of repeat business through their expertise.”

By the mid 2020 the sport fishing fleet included fourteen 17’ vessels, four 19’ vessels, five 24’ vessels and the 45’ charter yacht, *Pacific Lure*. The two lodges offered private and comfortable accommodations, and Shearwater Resort and Marina were included on a number of “must-see” lists of fishing

lodges throughout BC. Garnering media attention consistently through 2016, 2017 and 2018, Shearwater Resort and Marina were featured several times in the Vancouver Sun newspaper and various magazines and articles.

“Five species of Pacific salmon, aggressive lingcod, and slab-sided halibut [lurk] in the rugged and stunningly beautiful saltwater coastline that circumnavigates some 40,000 islands and pushes deep into the steep-sided glacially-carved

inlets,” wrote David Y. Wei and Suzanne L. Clouthier for the *Vancouver Sun* in May 2017. They wrote, “Excursions up long glacial fjords like Dean Channel and Roscoe Inlet provide unmatched eco-tourism and wildlife-viewing. Stroll the secluded shores of Goose Island, visit

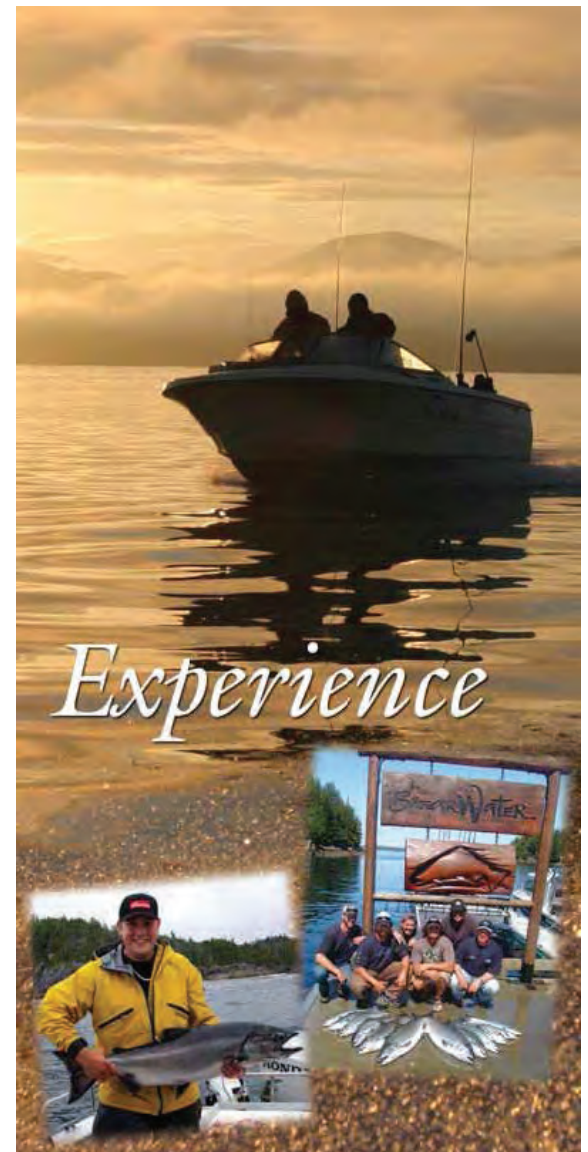


**LEFT**  
With the addition of an R44 helicopter to Shearwater's assets in 2016, eco-tourism quickly gained traction.

remote hot springs, and spot many different species of whales or even the rare Spirit Bear.”

With the addition of an R44 helicopter to Shearwater’s assets in 2016, eco-tourism quickly gained traction. Remote hot springs adventures, secluded beach escapes, unmatched fly-in fly fishing and more were now available. They cemented the area as a sought-after tourist destination for anyone looking for world-class fishing or a spectacular connection to nature.

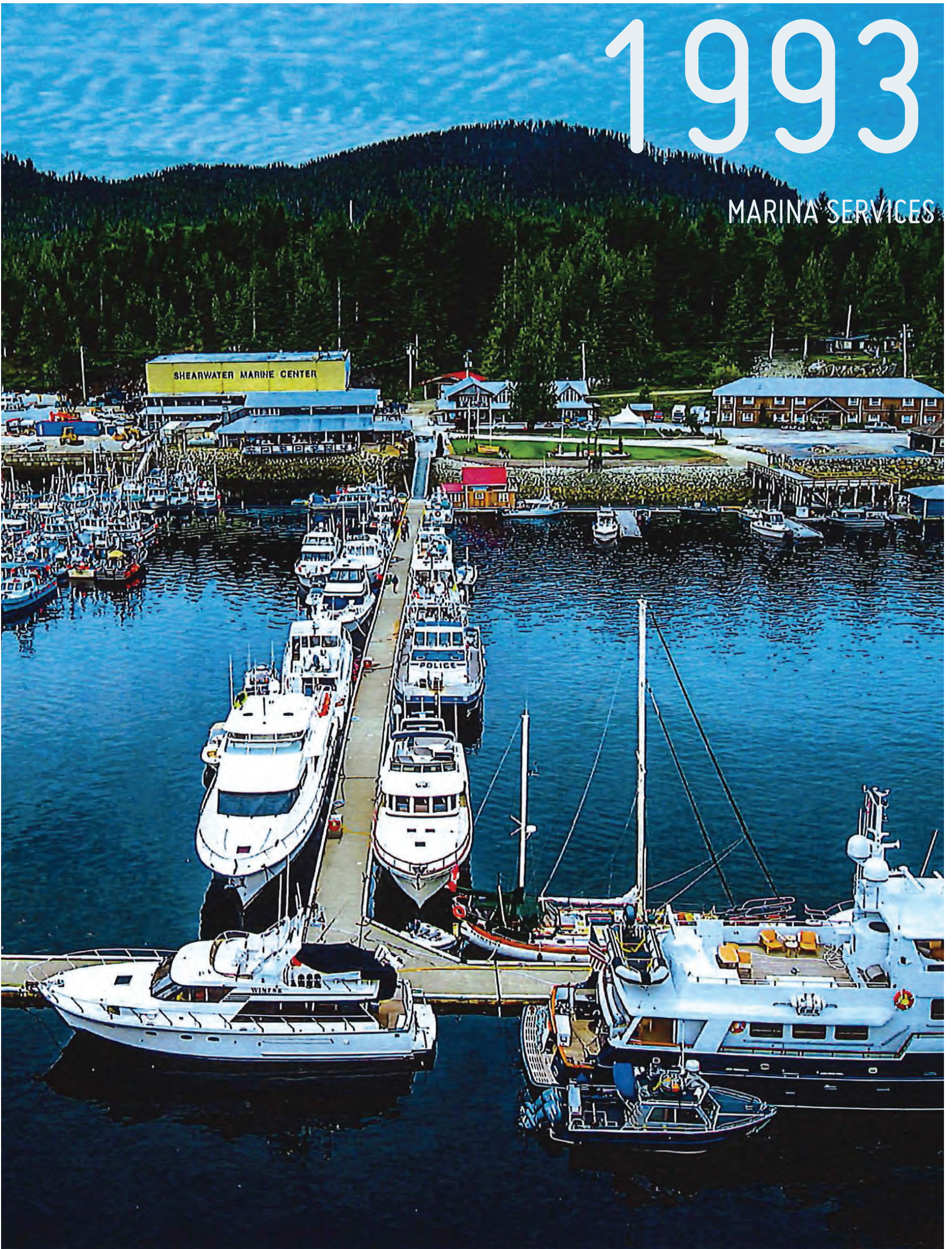
Through Shearwater’s continued efforts to market its sport fishing and now eco-tourism to much broader audiences across North America, the “Gateway to the Great Bear Rainforest” has become a destination hub recognized by world-renowned sport fishing lodges and wildlife enthusiasts alike ■



**LEFT**  
*Heiltsuk Nation fishing guides have built a reputation which draws repeat sport fishing enthusiasts back to Denny Island year-after-year.*

# 1993

MARINA SERVICES



**M**arine services have always been the backbone of Shearwater's business model. When Craig took over the company from his father, upgrading and expanding the marina, shipyard and surrounding services were a high priority and an ever-evolving process.

In 1967, the two existing RCAF hangars were in a state of deterioration. One of the first projects Craig tackled as the owner was tearing one down to use it to rebuild and solidify the other, reinforcing the 15,000-square-foot protected building for Shearwater's shipyard. The move would enable the company to build fibreglass fishing

vessels in 1969. Still, it also provided incredible covered capacity for large ships and paved the way for Shearwater to become an indispensable remote repair and service centre. A marine hardware store was quickly established

Limited had invested approximately \$350,000 into improvements and additions in and around the company's base. The next 15-plus years would be taken up with hotel and restaurant construction and installing an airstrip and airport,

but the '90s saw a strong focus on the marina and shipyard to grow the business.

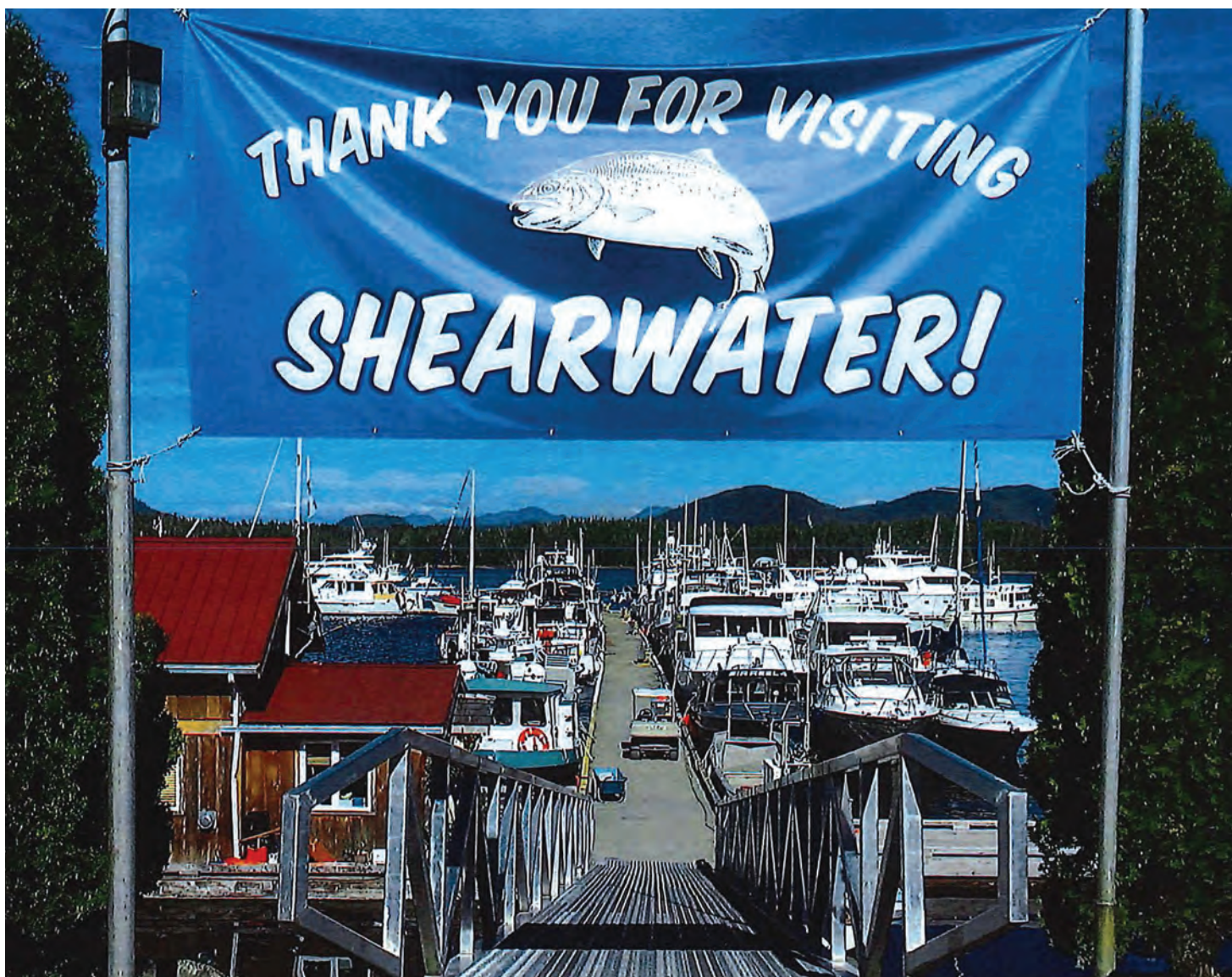
In 1992, Shearwater agreed

with the International Marine Floating Structures (IMFS) of Richmond to come to Shearwater and teach the crew there how to build concrete floats to IMFS specs. Shearwater became the IMFS

Shearwater leased a sizeable piece of waterfront property to the BC Ferries Corporation to install a terminal on Denny Island.

in 1968 to service the shipyard, fishermen and the local area, which began to increase traffic to Denny Island as word spread gradually.

By 1975, Craig and Shearwater Marine



**LEFT**  
*With the only full-service marina facility on the Inside Passage between Port Hardy and Prince Rupert—a distance of 300 miles—the company was strategically positioned to develop and deliver a wide variety of essential marine services*

North Coast representative and built several floats in the hangar facility for various customers. However, most importantly, the crew learned to make floats for their marina, which are still operating today.

“We built the IMFS concrete floats to learn how it is done. We required the ability to built the floats, so we saw this as a business opportunity and a learning opportunity,” explains Craig, adding, “but we never saw it as a long-term business operation.”

With the only full-service marina facility on the Inside Passage between Port Hardy and Prince Rupert—a distance of 300 miles—the company was strategically positioned to develop and deliver a wide variety of essential marine services with 1,500 feet of newly installed marina moorage, Shearwater very quickly began welcoming significantly more business.

The next few years would see massive general

upgrades to the marina and Denny Island. In 1994, the company secured an R&D grant from the federal government—the only grant in Shearwater’s history—to build new concrete floats for the marina. A marine travel lift capable of lifting vessels to 70 tons was purchased from Florida and installed in 1996.

Around the same time, Shearwater donated a sizeable piece of waterfront property to the BC Ferries Corporation to install a terminal on Denny Island. The connecting roll-on roll-off regularly scheduled service to Port Hardy and Bella Coola was a significant development for the Denny Island community and its economic growth.

Craig also realized that reliable water transportation was needed between Shearwater and the surrounding communities around that time. Shearwater’s water taxi division was established with the launch

**BOTTOM**

*Shearwater donated a sizeable piece of waterfront property to the BC Ferries Corporation to install a terminal on Denny Island.*





of the Shearwater Seabus, to establish a safe, continuous daily passenger service between Bella Bella (Campbell Island) and Shearwater (Denny Island).

In 1998, the company prepared a business plan to construct a bulk marine fuel station to serve

crane, expanding the water taxi business, and the construction of freight terminals in Richmond and Port Hardy along with a power barge to establish a freight delivery service for Shearwater and more than 20 other locations.

In 1998, the company prepared a business plan to construct a bulk marine fuel station to serve fishing vessels, aviation traffic, and public vehicles

fishing vessels, aviation traffic, and public vehicles. However, Shearwater's then financial partner, Banca Italiana, refused the undertaking and suggested Craig consider retirement instead. Never one to take no for an answer, Craig instead partnered with the Bank of Montreal and secured refinancing for the fuel station and several other projects over the next decade, including an on-shore tank farm, the acquisition of a tug, steel barge and

crane, expanding the water taxi business, and the construction of freight terminals in Richmond and Port Hardy along with a power barge to establish a freight delivery service for Shearwater and more than 20 other locations. Equipped with the latest fuel equipment and metering, the station had an office, sales area, breezeway, two bathrooms and a product storage room atop a 1,200-square-foot float. Bulk storage tanks were located onshore, along with a vehicle dispensing unit and a large helicopter pad. Crucially, the station now offered aviation and jet fuel, a significant development that allowed Shearwater to expand its business to planes and helicopters.

**ABOVE**

*The shipyard services included general ship repair, welding, mechanical, carpentry and an outboard shop. The shipyard operation included the concrete dry land storage area, the 70-ton lift, a tidal ramp, trailer equipment and a barge grid.*

The station included a small retail store, and the overall facility became a significant revenue producer, in part because of Shearwater’s “corporate diversification strategy,” as the fuel was purchased directly from the oil company in Port Hardy and delivered via Shearwater’s own *Central Coaster*, a company-owned coastal freight service, thus endeavoring an entirely independent refuelling operation.

Providing a secure refuelling area for planes and helicopters also brought a much-needed increased aviation presence to the region regarding safety, exploration and providing provisions to previously inaccessible areas along the coast.

Brent Case, a supervisor with hydroelectric company Boralex in nearby Ocean Falls, said, “Shearwater

Marine has saved many lives and marine assets over the years. Surrounding communities depend on Shearwater Marine’s facilities and a vast array of services for their standard of living.”

Continuing to improve accessibility, the water taxi fleet grew to include five vessels by 2015—one

40-passenger, one 30-passenger, one 25-passenger and two 12-passenger certified vessels. They maintain an hourly charter business throughout the North Central Coast and Inside Passage between Bella

Coola, Prince Rupert and Port Hardy. The Seabus operates solely as a dedicated link between the two communities. Far beyond transport, the water taxis are also used for whale watching, touring and as support vessels for the kayaking business. On many occasions, they’ve assisted the Coast Guard’s search and rescue operations in the region and have been instrumental in saving lives and assets.

**BOTTOM**  
*The floating concrete fuel station was designed and constructed entirely in Shearwater’s shop in 2000 and launched with the 70-ton travel lift. Equipped with the latest fuel equipment and metering, the station had an office, sales area, breezeway, two bathrooms and a product storage room atop a 1,200-square-foot float.*

“Shearwater Marine has saved many lives and marine assets over the years. Surrounding communities depend on Shearwater Marine’s facilities and a vast array of services for their standard of living.”





In a 2015 letter supporting Craig's nomination as one of BCIT's Distinguished Alumni, William Brain commented that the water taxis provide "the opportunity for increased interaction between the Central Coast communities with safety and dependability while improving the marine distress coverage for the region." He wrote, "Shearwater provides critical marine rescue services which significantly reduces the risk of operating in remote areas of the Central Coast. This helps bring insurance costs into line and allows for more economic activity, which is diversified into many different sectors."

By 2018, Shearwater had become a coveted destination for fishing, eco-touring and pleasure cruising. A well-equipped marina supplied boats of all sizes with moorage, power, potable water, excellent cellular service, and yacht moorage that was (and still is) fully booked throughout the summer months, only available by prior reservation. The shipyard services included general ship repair, welding, mechanical, carpentry and an outboard shop. The shipyard operation included the concrete dry land storage area, the 70-ton lift, a tidal ramp, trailer equipment and a barge grid. The shipyard had also become an essential facility to maintain Shearwater's vessels, heavy equipment, vehicles and the various commercial and residential buildings throughout the community.

The fuel station, helicopter pad, water taxi fleet, and BC Ferries dock all facilitated exponential growth and much-improved

accessibility for the remote region.

Under Craig's guidance, Shearwater became a central hub for mariners heading to and from Alaska or Haida Gwaii via the Inside Passage and important support support for the First Nations

Under Craig's guidance, Shearwater became a central hub for mariners heading to and from Alaska or Haida Gwaii via the Inside Passage and massive support for the First Nations communities along the Central Coast.

communities along the Central Coast.

"Commercial fishing has been the mainstay of our employment history, and having the Shearwater Marine support services in this remote area has been instrumental to the successful participation of our fishers in this industry," wrote Hilistis "Pauline" Waterfall in support of Craig's 2015 nomination for a BCIT Distinguished Alumni Award. Hilistis, a 2010 Order of BC recipient and "Keeper of the Knowledge" of the Heiltsuk Nation, went on to write, "This is of importance because there were limited opportunities for our fishers to access capital funds and resources to purchase and maintain fishing vessels, and Craig's business practices allowed for our people to grow and flourish over the years."

Often offering water taxi services free of charge for local events, for students and more, Craig also helped to foster a strong sense of community amongst the residents of Denny Island and with the neighbouring Heiltsuk community at Bella Bella.

"First Nations really relied on the water taxi service for a long time. We also donated a lot of services to the First Nations," explains Craig. "Their graveyard [Heiltsuk] is on a separate Island, and anytime a band member died, they had a service at the graveyard, and we provided a free water taxi from the town to the island. We did that for any family anytime and donated trips to various other locations on numerous occasions." ■

# 2000

COASTAL FREIGHT AND MARINE BUSINESS



The Shearwater Marine Group is one of the oldest and most established companies on British Columbia's coast. The company and community were founded in 1947 by Andrew Widsten, a descendant of Norwegian immigrants who settled in Bella Coola in 1894. Andrew Widsten, who had served as a marine superintendent at Ocean Falls and as a captain in the Royal Canadian Air Force's Coastal Marine Division during World War II, purchased a retired RCAF base in Bella Bella and established Widsten Marine Services Ltd and the community of Shearwater. This included a shipyard, sawmill, and marine business serving the neighbouring communities of Bella Bella, Bella Coola, and the surrounding area.

In 1967, Andrew's son Craig took over the company and rebranded it as the Shearwater Marine Group. Under Craig's leadership, the company and the community of Shearwater have grown and expanded, developing a range of infrastructure and facilities such as a full-service marina, grocery store, post office, school, hotel, pub, restaurant, fuel dock, airstrip, and more. Recently, the company has added a fishing resort, artesian water supply, marine travel lift, water taxi

services, and ecotourism activities.

Despite its growth, the Shearwater Marine Group remained a family operation, with Craig's son Brad as a project manager and daughter Tracy as the corporate office manager. Craig, the board chairman until the recent sale of the company, attributes much of Shearwater's success to the dedicated team of managers, particularly Mark Schlichting, CFO and Alan Tite, General Manager, who for decades have been essential to the success of the Shearwater enterprise.

Although the *Arctic Kapvik* and *Central Coaster* freight service held the spot light since the year 2000, the value of the original Shearwater tug and barge business cannot be underestimated. Shearwater was the only company with tug and barge assets in the entire Central Coast region, which at times proved to be a very important competitive advantage, particularly regarding marine incidents, vessel salvage and insurance work. Craig expanded this marine division significantly over the years ending up with four barges, two tugs, two cranes and an array of construction and salvage equipment. This marine division was always an important revenue producer for the company..



**TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM**  
*The Central Coaster, the flagship of the Shearwater Marine fleet*





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## FREIGHT SERVICES

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As an isolated region without road links, the central coast has always relied on marine transportation for supplies. This service was initially provided by vessels from the Union Steamship Fleet, Northland

economy and prepared the company to serve the region's needs for the foreseeable future.

In 2001, Craig purchased the *Arctic Kapvik* and it immediately underwent its first substantial refit. Shearwater pulled the vessel into their shipyard

**ABOVE**  
*Worker on the  
Central Coaster.*

and changed the waterjet propulsion system to conventional shafts and propellers. The *Arctic Kapvik* was then immediately engaged in transporting fresh salmon for Marine Harvest Inc from the Kitasoo (Klemtu) fish farm

In 2014, Craig boldly decided to certify the *Central Coaster* as a tanker, allowing it to transport bulk diesel below deck — a service demanded and vital to many communities on the central coast.

Navigation, and Coast Ferries, starting in the 1990s, by a succession of small marine transport companies.

to Bella Coola.

This ambitious project demonstrated Widsten's and Shearwater's confidence in the central coast

In 2006, Shearwater established its freight service to serve the region's needs better, taking over the route operated by central coast carriers from Port Hardy's Jensen Cove to the north of Cape Caution. However,

instead of using a tug and barge-like other carriers, Shearwater employed its self-propelled ro-ro freight barge, *Arctic Kapvik*.

In 2010, Craig deployed the *Arctic Kapvik* on Shearwater's established central coast freight run. With business booming, the company decided to give the *Kapvik* a second major refit, including a new, larger elevated wheelhouse and accommodations, all new wiring and navigation equipment, rebuilt bow rake, and an extended ramp. It was relaunched and rechristened as the *Central Coaster*.

In 2014, Craig boldly decided to certify the *Central Coaster* as a tanker, allowing it to transport bulk diesel below deck – a service demanded and vital to many communities on the central coast. This was no easy feat, as the *Central Coaster* represented a first-of-its-kind classification: a self-propelled, double-hulled, mixed freight, ro-ro, fuel barge/tanker.

According to Shawn Kennedy, a former commercial fisherman and mineral exploration company

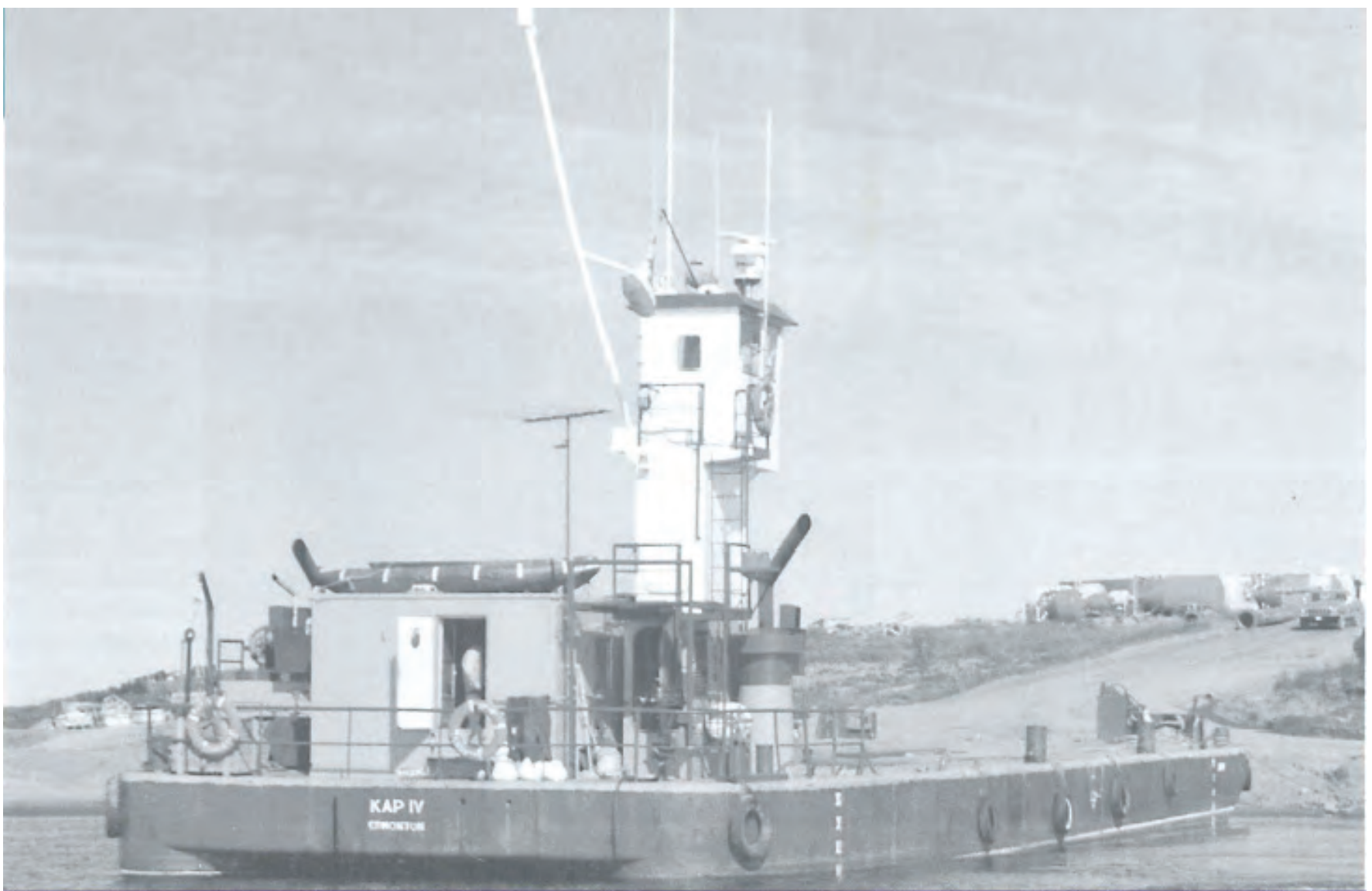
founder, he was impressed by Craig's drive and vision: "When I first met Craig in person in 2012, he was talking about converting his self-powered transport barge (MV *Central Coaster*), which supplied Shearwater and other Great Bear Area operators with freight and fuel, into a double-hulled, Lloyd's of London approved, multi-use tanker, to service the Great Bear Area's freight and fuel requirements. I was honoured to accompany Craig to Arrow shipyards where his multi-use ship was cut in half, lengthened by 30 ft and then a double-hull added to meet safety today's standards."

In 2015, to comply with Transport Canada's new double-hull requirements for oil barges, the *Central Coaster* underwent its third major refit at Arrow Marine. This was phase 2 of its 2010 refit. The project included doubling the hull, lengthening the vessel by 30 feet, re-powering it, and installing a new crane.

"The refit and repurposing of the MV *Central Coaster* were overseen by Craig's exceptionally capable son

#### **BELOW**

*In 2001 Shearwater Marine bought the Arctic Kapvik from Pacific Cachalot and commenced conversion of the propulsion to conventional shafts and propellers. The Arctic Kapvik eventually became the Central Coaster.*



Brad Widsten, explains Kennedy. “The work ethic that is apparent throughout the Widsten Family is exemplary. Craig’s wife Elaine, his daughters Tracy and Kelly all have the pioneer spirit and work ethic, as well as grandchildren like Kaitlyn, all of whom I’ve witnessed in action.”

Transport Canada had no specific regulations for this type of vessel. So Craig, with Mike Heavenor, captain of the *Central Coaster*, Transport Canada, Bureau Veritas, Robert Allan Ltd., and several consulting and engineering groups worked together for over a year to hammer out the certification requirements. The process was costly, including extensive safety assessment procedures and specialized tanker training for the crew.

Despite the challenges, Shearwater remained determined to see the project through. Craig explained, “We were in uncharted waters, and there was a list of major and minor items that needed defining and sorting out for certification. The process became very costly for Shearwater, but I trust that the time spent establishing this precedent-setting endorsement will benefit and help pave the way for vessel operators pursuing similar certification in the future.”

According to Craig, the *Central Coaster*, at the time, was “the largest single investment in the company’s history”.

Finally, in 2016, the *Central Coaster* was certified and re-launched, becoming one of only two self-propelled cargo barges on the BC Coast that was

**LEFT**  
*Prior to being cut off from the midsection, the bow was refitted. This included adding fairing to transition from the square profile under the ramp to the trapezoidal profile of the new double-hulled midsection.*

**BELOW LEFT, RIGHT**  
*The stern section of the Central Coaster, which contains all the machinery and accommodations spaces, was separated from forward end of hull and had a new 30-foot hull extension welded onto it. The line between old and new metal is visible just below the foot of the wheelhouse stairway.*



certified to transport bulk diesel below deck. The 150-ft vessel is now hauling fuel and supplies to the central coast's isolated communities: "It's an extremely safe, fast and efficient vessel," explains Craig. "We thank all the individuals and groups participating in the certification process and our loyal

Denny Island is no different in this regard.

As a coastal community with no road access, Shearwater relies heavily on marine transportation. After the war, Union Steamships and Northland Navigation ships supplied the community's needs

from the Lower Mainland of BC. Coast Ferries' coaster, the Tye Princess, also played a role in transportation. In the early 1990s, various marine transport companies with tugs and barges or self-propelled landing

#### **BOTTOM**

*Pictured aboard the Central Coaster at its launch ceremony are Shearwater Marine Group's chairman of the board Craig Widsten (on the left) and his son, project manager Brad Widsten (on the right)*

But it was through Craig's initiative that Shearwater Marine took over the service with their self-propelled barge - and the region has benefited greatly..

central coast customers for supporting us during this extended refit process."

#### **LEGACY OF CONNECTING CENTRAL COAST COMMUNITIES**

Shearwater, Bella Bella and Denny Island are secluded communities. The Denny Island community is small, with only about 85 permanent residents. As a matter of necessity, people in isolated communities help each other in times of need, and

barges attempted to service the central coast run. More Marine's Central Coast Carriers was the most recent, operating out of Jensen Cove at Port Hardy until 2006.

But it was through Craig's initiative that Shearwater Marine took over the service with their self-propelled barge - and the region has benefited greatly.

Shearwater's *Central Coaster* provides a vital link for the supply of fuels and freight to the central coast.





Shearwater also provides scheduled service from Port Hardy to numerous remote locations, including four First Nation communities, The Wuikinuxv Nation/Rivers Inlet, Tlatlasikwala Nation/Bull Harbour, Heiltsuk Nation/Bella Bella, Kitsoo Nation/Klemtu, the Mowi West salmon farms and the communities of Shearwater, Ocean Falls, Dawson landing, the Hakai Institute and numerous logging camps and

community cohesion and viability.

“Shearwater Marine has our full support to remain an essential service to the central coast. They provide valuable services to our hospital and lifesaving oxygen,” explains Dawn Wilson, program manager of Vancouver Coastal Health. “R. W. Large Memorial Hospital is the only provincial hospital located on

the coast and is the hub of health-care services to the communities of Bella Bella, Klemtu, Denny Island and Ocean Falls. We rely on the *Central*

*Coaster* to deliver our weekly propane needs as well they barge all of our oxygen for our hospital (something BC Ferries cannot do).”

“Shearwater delivers critical supplies, including food, fuel and the staples of life, to many coastal communities, particularly in the B.C. central coast area,” explains Captain Phillip J. Nelson, president Council of Marine Carriers. “This supply chain is

**ABOVE**  
*Lengthened, double-hulled and repowered, the 150-ft Central Coaster arrives at Shearwater with a full load of cargo, equipment and fuel.*

Even the smallest communities have come to rely on Craig’s freight services for survival.

resorts throughout the region. Shearwater’s service also includes supplying propane to the hospital in Bella Bella, the school, residents and the Bella Bella RCMP.

Many community members, leaders, and business associations recognize the impact Craig, the *Central Coaster* and Shearwater have had on the region, the essential services provided, and their role in creating



vital to many First Nations communities, logging camps, aquaculture facilities and non-native coastal townships. For many such places, Shearwater Marine, with their vessel, the *Central Coaster*, this is the only means of having their provisions and fuel replenished throughout the year.”

The Council of Marine Carriers is a shipowners’ association that advocates on behalf of western Canadian domestic shipowners, primarily those operating towboats and other vessels such as coastal freighters and service vessels. Captain Nelson explains the unique role Craig played and Shearwater continues to play on the central coast; “As you can see, Shearwater Marine with the m.v. *Central Coaster* is crucial to the continued survival of many communities and organizations. Without this service, those living and working along the area of the coast where Shearwater Marine operates would have a tough time. Although B.C. Ferries calls at some of those places, such as Bella Bella, they do not have the capacity nor the ability to provide a small part of the goods that Shearwater Marine can. The ferry system is prohibited from

carrying dangerous goods, such as propane and fuel products, onboard their passenger vessels and cannot reach any community which is not part of a fixed ferry route.”

Even the smallest communities have come to rely on Craig’s freight services for survival.

Ocean Falls is a small community of around 30 full-time residents located approximately 450 km northeast of Vancouver. There is no road access, and the communities are only accessible by boat or float plane. Ocean Falls supplies clean, renewable, and highly reliable electricity to approximately 500 BC Hydro customers in Shearwater and Bella Bella, the home of the Heiltsuk First Nation, the largest community on the central coast. Ocean Falls has one mile of road and two industries: Boralex is a Quebec-based company that produces renewable wind, solar, hydroelectric and thermal energy, and Mowi a large international fish farming corporation.

“The only other amenity we have is the post office,” explains Gladys Suderman,

Ocean Falls Improvement District chair. “The only access we have to bring supplies in is the *Central Coaster* currently running out of Shearwater, Denny Island. It not only supplies the residents of Ocean Falls with the transport of vehicles, fuel, building supplies, equipment and anything else we need to survive here, but it also continuously brings in our food supply. Not having this precious service would make it extremely difficult and diminish the quality of life for the residents of Ocean Falls.”

Shearwater’s *Central Coaster*, the freight business and fleet of tugs, barges and equipment was also sold in 2021 to Central Coast Marine Services Limited. CCMS is a new company formed by Don McNeice of Bridgeview Maine Limited.



**LEFT**  
*The Central Coaster's new 60-foot double-hulled midsection was fabricated by Canron Western Constructors in Delta, and welded in place between the refitted original bow and the new 30-ft extension at the stern.*

# 2013

UNITED IN HISTORY





**ABOVE**  
*The United in  
History mural being  
unveiled.*

In the summer of 2013, Craig saw the culmination of two momentous historical projects that honoured the long relationship between the communities of Shearwater on Denny Island and their Indigenous neighbours on the Central Coast. They also fulfilled a decades-long dream of his late father. That July 6th, over a full day of celebration and remembrance, more than 400 people—among them the local community, government officials, chiefs and members from five area First Nations (Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Rivers Inlet, Klemtu and Hartley Bay), and the descendants of those honoured—gathered in the sunshine to witness the dedication of the Bella Bella RCAF War Memorial and Cenotaph, and the unveiling of the moving Bella Bella mural, “United In History.”

“It was a challenge getting the permission of all the families to include their family member on the

mural,” explains Craig. “But once we were able to get permission, the families were fully supportive of the Memorial.”

Craig’s father, Andrew Widsten, had been a captain of the Royal Canadian Air Force coastal marine division during the Second World War and had wanted to erect a memorial from very early on. Still, from his initial purchase of the Bella Bella RCAF station in 1947, through establishing the Shearwater community, to his death in 1973, Andrew never got the chance.

When Craig began considering retirement in the early 2000s, he wanted to create a legacy project to honour his father’s wishes and contributions to the community. Still, he also wanted to recognize the exceptional relationship that had evolved and flourished over decades between Shearwater and the

Heiltsuk First Nation of Bella Bella and other First Nations in the region.

For the military side of things, Craig worked with Russ Helberg (vice president of RCAF Squadron 101 of Port Hardy and a former mayor of Port Hardy) and Chris Weicht (a pilot, author and authority on the RCAF West Coast flying boat stations), as both men had considerable experience with various RCAF memorials and brought expertise and invaluable support to the project. Craig also worked closely with the Denny Island Community Development Association, particularly Clinton and Cathi Coutts.

Through Shearwater Marine Ltd., Craig donated the memorial's land to the Federal Government. He also pledged to the Heiltsuk Council that no matter whose hands Shearwater moved into in the future, the Widsten Family will undertake to care for and maintain the memorial site.



**LEFT, BOTTOM  
LEFT, BOTTOM  
RIGHT**

*Descendants  
of each person  
depicted in the  
mural spoke about  
their ancestors.*



Recognizing and honouring the service of First Nations veterans who'd served in various wars and peacekeeping missions during the 20th century was an enormous part of the war memorial. So two monuments were planned in addition to the cenotaph and memorial plaques.

Members of the Canadian Museum of Flight in Langley, B.C., built a one-fifth fibreglass replica of a Stranraer aircraft with a 17-foot wingspan. The Supermarine Stranraer was the first of many flying boats based at Denny Island and gave protection and surveillance to the West Coast after the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Standing beside the replica is an obelisk and a "Warrior pole" carved by respected local Heiltsuk artist Ian Reid, whose ancestral name is Nusi. The Warrior pole depicts the raven guarding the warrior as a tribute to their courage and honour. It recognizes and commemorates the First Nations members who joined the war effort and fought for the country. Many

who enlisted never received appropriate recognition for their service. In some cases, they lost their status after returning from the war, no longer fitting in either community of people—military or Indigenous—and were left destitute.

"History" event is part of one of the most remarkable unsolicited, all-inclusive, pro-reconciliation events I have witnessed anywhere. I'm not aware of any other all-inclusive event like it within the Great Bear Rainforest / Great Bear Sea Area, primarily funded by an individual with the

hope of 'harmony for all residents.'"

"The mural at Shearwater unveiled at the 'United in History' event is part of one of the most remarkable unsolicited, all-inclusive, pro-reconciliation events I have witnessed anywhere."

Sisulth "Frank" Johnson, then-elected Chief Councillor of the Wuikinuxv Nation and grandson of Dave Bernard, one of those 12 honoured, spoke at the memorial

On that July day, amidst a military dedication and a traditional Indigenous blessing ceremony, Craig read out the names of 12 First Nations veterans whose history and service had been unearthed through extensive research.

ceremony, saying, "Today also acknowledges all those who were never acknowledged...Many Aboriginals lost all their rights and status by joining the army, so when they returned, they had nothing to go back to. Non-native servicemen were given their choice of land, but Aboriginals were not allowed to own land. They were no longer considered Aboriginal, yet they weren't white either, so many of them died of alcoholism and substance abuse on the city streets."

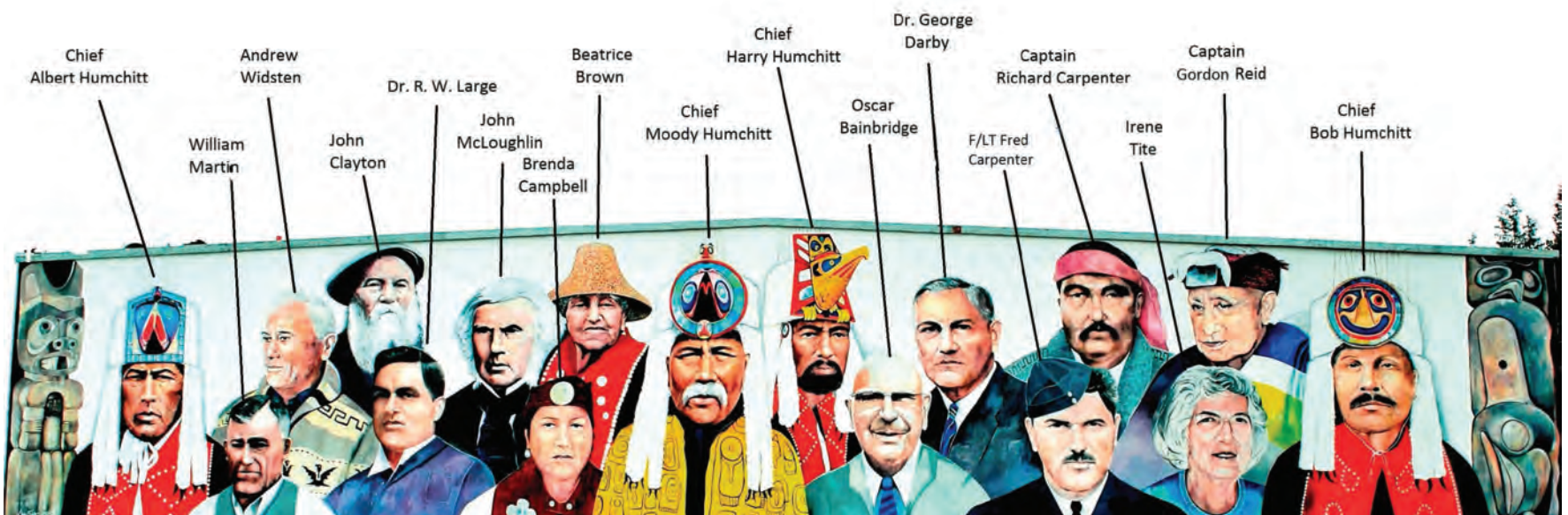
"Craig is a remarkable, kind B.C. entrepreneur," says long-time friend Shawn Kennedy. "Craig's family values and community spirit are evident in the BC town built by the Widsten Family. The mural at Shearwater unveiled at the "United in



**LEFT**  
*RCAF veterans were piped and escorted by RCMP members.*

# Bella Bella "United in History"

Vision: Craig Widsten Artist: Paul Ygartua



The Warrior Pole and the obelisk, side by side with the Stranraer, honour their memory and service to the war effort.

In the words of carver Nusi from a press release for the event: The pole “will be installed by the crew and descendants of the people who went to war and still live here. This pole will stand for generations to come, and people will never forget the sacrifices that were made to protect our country, and we shall never forget the fallen.”

Later that afternoon, the crowd watched as the “United In History” mural was unveiled, the historic moment many years in the making.

The concept for a mural had been born years earlier, inspired by the blank wall on the side of the original RCAF hangar, and the vast space, coupled with the history and meaning of the building itself, made the perfect canvas to celebrate the prominent immigrant and Indigenous individuals who’d contributed to the establishment of the greater Bella Bella community over the past 150 years.

Craig immediately approached the Heiltsuk community to collaborate on the project, working with Hilistis “Pauline” Waterfall—whom he called his “visionary colleague”—and Duka’aisla “William” Housty, a “guru of Heiltsuk history, culture, traditions and family lineage.”

Hilistis, a 2010 Order of BC recipient, educator and founding member of the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association and “Keeper of the Knowledge” of the Heiltsuk Nation, was instrumental in making the mural possible through her advice, knowledge and organizational skills. Duka’aisla, whose grandfather Ray Humchitt was the oldest hereditary chief at the ceremony and the only surviving First Nations veteran of the 12 who were honoured, said: “Craig had heard me at a potlatch in the past and had called me to assist with the mural’s cultural history. He also asked me if I would do the ceremonies and blessings. Craig felt that it was really important to include the whole community, and today is about the whole community living side by side to bridge and acknowledge the relationship that we have.”

The 120 feet long and 22 feet high mural features 17 influential figures in Shearwater’s and Bella Bella’s histories and was painted by internationally famed muralist Paul Ygartua over 21 days.

Brought to life in vibrant colours and bold strokes, the four founding Chiefs of the Heiltsuk Nation—Albert Humchitt, Moody Humchitt, Harry Humchitt and Bob Humchitt—gaze out from the mural in regalia, supporting and framing the rest of the figures. Hudson’s Bay Chief Factor John McLoughlin, who established Fort McLoughlin at Bella Bella in 1833, looks out beside Brenda Campbell, the first Heiltsuk native to master reading and to write the English language, an advocate of native women’s rights and an important

**ABOVE**  
*Individuals depicted in the “United in History” mural.*

confidant to Chief Moody Humchitt, and Beatrice Brown, known as Granny Bea, a revered Heiltsuk elder of her day and a tireless community organizer and supporter of families, children, education and Heiltsuk culture and traditions.

During the turn of the century, Captain Richard Carpenter was the most famous Indigenous carver, artist, canoe and boat builder on the BC coast. Drs. George Darby and R.W. Large, and Irene Tite, a student nurse and respected RW Large Memorial Hospital matron for many years. Captain Gordon Reid, a respected elder and admired leader of the Heiltsuk community, affectionately called Grandpa Gordon, is painted with kind eyes near the far right of the mural.

Immigrant entrepreneurs and businessmen William Martin (founder of the general store and post office for Campbell Island), John Clayton (first immigrant land owner in Bella Coola and proprietor of the first store in old town, Bella Bella) and Oscar Bainbridge (post master of 50 years for BC Packers at east Bella Bella) are repre-

of Indigenous and immigrant community members who all contributed significantly to the growth and success of the Shearwater and Bella Bella communities through the 18th and 19th centuries.

“It’s been an honour for me to paint portraits of the extraordinary people of the Heiltsuk Nation... and the individuals that contributed to the historical events that took place from when John McLoughlin arrived in the early 1800s,” said artist Paul Ygartua.

Duka’aisla presented both Craig and Ygartua with beaded eagle feathers at the

unveiling ceremony, which “represent the strength, unity and power that come from the wings of the Great Eagle,” he said. “It comes from all of our people in recognizing your foresight, drive and determination to make sure this project was

Brought to life in vibrant colours and bold strokes, the four founding Chiefs of the Heiltsuk Nation—Albert Humchitt, Moody Humchitt, Harry Humchitt and Bob Humchitt—gaze out from the mural in regalia

sented, as are F/L F.S. Carpenter, the first commander of RCAF Station Bella Bella during the Second World War, and of course, the late Captain Andrew Widsten, the founder of Shearwater.

The mural honours a broad intersection



**LEFT**  
Bella Bella RCAF War Memorial and Warrior Poles.

completed. Thank you for making sure that both of our communities were working together and included in this great day.” (Simon Schopman, *Coast Mountain News*, July 12.)

saying, “What endeared me most was Paul’s openness to culture, his openness to learning and his willingness to capture the spirit and essence of our ancestors. In the old days, our people believed that if you could capture the spirit of someone in a photograph or a painting, then it was an eternal treasure that kept us connected to them. When he started, he felt the ancestral and spiritual energy. I call him my ‘mural miracle maker.’” (Simon Schopman, *Coast Mountain News*, July 12.)

**BOTTOM**

*Craig is joined by his family as he spoke about his father who is depicted in the mural..*

“Craig has had the business foresight to succeed where very few others could manage to survive in this environment. Shearwater Marine has saved many lives and marine assets over the years. Surrounding communities in the Region depend on Shearwater Marine’s facilities and vast array of services for their standard of living.” – Brent Case, Supervisor, Boralex Ocean Falls LP

Jennifer Rice, MLA, North Coast, attended the unveiling of the Veterans Memorial And

Family members and descendents of those honoured in the mural spoke to the gathered crowd, sharing memories and stories. Hilistis spoke in appreciation of Ygartua’s talent and effort in painting the mural,

Heritage Mural and noted the significance of the event and Craig’s beneficial impact on the Bella Bella region:







“I witnessed the unveiling of a mural that had been painted on the side of an original World War II aircraft hangar by internationally acclaimed muralist Paul Ygartua. The mural features portraits of the four founding chiefs of the Heiltsuk Nation and images of historic Heiltsuk and non-aboriginal community members who made a significant contribution to the establishment of the greater Bella Bella community during the past 150 years.”

“This special day was the dream of Craig Widsten, who wanted to honour his father’s legacy, Andrew Widsten, as well as give back to the community and the Heiltsuk Nation. Craig’s father, Andrew Widsten, who was captain of the Royal Canadian Air Force coastal marine division during World War II, purchased the Bella Bella RCAF station in 1947 and founded the community of Shearwater. He established a shipyard, marine business, sawmill and elementary school. Today it hosts a world-class fishing lodge, full-service marina and resort.”

Keith Henry, CEO of the Aboriginal Tourism Association of BC, attended the ceremony and said, “This was a powerful day, and the Warrior pole and mural were a beautiful dedication to the history of the First Nation and others to the area of Denny Island as a Royal Canadian Air Force base during World War II. The true recognition by owner Craig Widsten of the contributions of the local First Nations communities and history was inspiring. As the owner, he paid tribute to his father, building on the relationships

he had formed over decades of living in the area and remaining committed to working with First Nations. The additions of the Warrior Pole and mural to Shearwater Marine resort, a world-class destination, are a true example of how non-Aboriginal tourism businesses can and should work with local First Nations to share the true histories of their communities and province with visitors.”

“Craig’s accomplishments have been much about family and community. His courage and drive as a B.C. maritime entrepreneur, founder of Shearwater, the town, and the Shearwater Marie Group have created the infrastructure for families in an area now gaining global recognition,” explains Shawn Kennedy. “His work has provided a safe harbour for many international travellers along the Inside Passage. Many of these travellers may need to realize why and how there is a spot for them to rest.”

With respect, remembrance and cultural integrity at the forefront, Craig brought together a vast variety of people across politics, across cultures and across geographies to collectively create a lasting legacy that honours and celebrates the history of the region, the relationship between Shearwater and the Indigenous communities, and all the individual and group efforts that have gone into transforming Denny Island into the world-class fishing and eco-tourism destination that it is today. ■

**ABOVE**  
The “United in History” mural’s presence in Shearwater.

Craig Widsten left an indelible mark on the west coast of British Columbia, Canada. Throughout his life, he profoundly impacted countless individuals and communities, inspiring them with his passion, dedication, and tireless work ethic. From his early days as a young visionary to his later years as a respected community leader in various fields, Craig's legacy continues to shape the lives of those who knew him.

