

# The Life of

# Ron Linsky



## Part Two

**R**on Linsky lived an amazing life. He was a “bio-politician” and a self-taught oceanographer. He had traveled around the world and under the seas. He had a story for everything.

You always learned something from Ron — he was a fount of knowledge, no matter what the topic. He’d even draw you a picture upside down to help illustrate his point, if needed!

A modest man, Ron didn’t brag about his accomplishments. He’d drop hints, but only if it pertained to something he was telling you. Consequently, not many people knew what he was like — and what he had done — outside of NWRI.

We wanted to share his remarkable story. It’s a compilation of interviews, newspaper articles, old resumes, personal letters, and a short autobiography that Ron once wrote about himself. We think you’ll be surprised by the man you meet here. We were, and we worked with him everyday.

### Setting Sail with USC

By the late 1960s, Ron Linsky had built a name for himself as an oceanographer.

He had created a one-of-its-kind Floating Lab Program that took thousands of students to sea to learn hands-on marine science. He was collaborating with Jacques Cousteau, the most famous oceanographer in the world. And he was traveling all the over the world, encouraging curriculums in marine science and recruiting the next generation of oceanographers.



Then, in 1970, everything changed. After years of trying to open doors toward the possibilities in marine science, Ron found a door opening up to him. In fact, the recruiter became the recruited when several universities approached him simultaneously to lead their ocean research programs. There was no competition, however, for Ron knew exactly which one he was going to work for — his beloved alma mater, the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles.

Thus began his career overseeing the brand-new Sea Grant Program at USC.

The purpose of Sea Grant was threefold. It was meant to 1) train and educate the next generation of marine scientists and engineers, 2) support research in marine resources management and development, and 3) provide advisory services to the business and science communities, as well as the general public.

Seeking out funding was just one part of Ron’s job as Director of Sea Grant at USC. The program was aimed at resolving issues in coastal resource development within the Southern California region.

Under Ron’s leadership, research focused on everything from the impacts of urban runoff on coastal waters to recreational and commercial harbor design and development. Some highlights included a study on the effects of the Santa Barbara Channel oil spill; a survey of the effects of industrial use on the California coast; and a survey on the possibilities of using unemployed aerospace personnel in

the field of oceanography (which resulted in new careers for many former aerospace engineers and technicians!).

### Around the World in 1,095 Days

It was during his time as Director of Sea Grant at USC that Ron really started to travel. In a 3-year period, he visited no less than 15 countries, spending months at a time in places like French Polynesia (Tahiti, he once said, was the most beautiful place he’d ever seen), Asia, and Europe.

Sometimes it was to conduct research, others times it was to organize international conferences or to present at leading oceanographic institutions throughout the world.

His work included:

*North America.* He was responsible for organizing bilingual international conferences and training programs in Mexico, including exploring the environmental impacts of opening the Trans-Peninsula

### The Team Player...

One of Ron’s favorite stories about his experience at USC involved his first look at the Sea Grant budget. In fact, he realized there was no budget. He knew that couldn’t be right, so he brought it up to his supervisor, Executive Vice President Zohrab Kaprielian — who smiled broadly at him and said, “Welcome to USC.”

Jerome B. Walker, Ph.D., who is currently Associate Provost at USC, remembers working with Ron so many years before.

“Ron was asked to run the Sea Grant program with virtually no budget,” Walker said, “and he was thrown upon his own resources to build research funding. His impressive entrepreneurial skills were being challenged early in his career, and he met that challenge successfully; but it must have been a considerable struggle, because he periodically reminded me of it for the next 30 years.”

The entrepreneurial spirit was alive and well at a university dependent upon private funding, and Ron was given quite the crash-course in leveraging resources by finding matching funds and creating joint-venture partnerships.

It was a lesson he took to heart.

From that point on, his career was defined by his ability to build collaborations and seek outside sources of funding. In fact, the last 15 years of his life were devoted to NWRI, which was unique in the industry because it required matching funding for all its projects.

And getting matching funds meant getting people to buy-in and work together.

“Ron had a special way of connecting with people — whether an NWRI Board member or the door attendant at the hotel. Effective leaders have this ability,” said longtime colleague Stan Ponce, Ph.D., of the U.S. Geological Survey. “I will always remember how Ron would greet me with that sparkle in his eye, that wonderful smile, and exuberance in his voice as he said, ‘Stanley! How are you?’ In the course of the conversation, he would put his arm on my shoulder and say, ‘Let me tell about this idea I have and how we can work together.’ Ron’s passion was contagious. He truly cared about people and was an expert at developing collaborative relationships. I learned a lot from him over the years. A part of Ron will always be with me, and I hope to model some of the behaviors he lived by.”

## Cruising Through Life...

Ron loved the ocean. He also loved to travel. So it should be of no surprise that he took a cruise every year for 8 years, beginning in 1977.

The South Pacific, Caribbean, and Panama Canal. Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore. These were some of the fabulous places Ron and his wife, Patricia, spent their winters cruising together.

However, these cruises weren't all fun and games. Ron worked as an enrichment lecturer, giving presentations on topics such as "Mankind and the Sea" or "Trumpets, Pearls, and Stars: The Dallas, Dynasty, and General Hospital of the Coral Reef."

His wife also participated, and together they would teach passengers how to snorkel. In fact, Ron loved to snorkel and scuba dive. He never had any scary shark stories (and scoffed at being afraid of sharks), but he'd had a couple close encounters with barracudas, which wouldn't let go once they latched on for a bite. Really, the only fear of the sea he had was of being sunburned, because his fair skin reddened faster inside the water than out.

Aside from the many adventures he had, the cruises were also special because of the lifelong friendships he made.

One of the first people he met aboard ship was Sterling Silliphant, a Hollywood writer who wrote the Academy-Award winning screenplay for *In the Heat of the Night*, as well as screenplays for films like *The Poseidon Adventure* (a cruise ship disaster movie!). They remained close until Silliphant's death in 1996.

Another dear friend was Sam Markell, a lawyer from Boston who, it turns out, was something of a poet. He wrote this ode to Ron in 1977:

Ron says life would be very simple if we were all "dunked" in the sea.  
He has come to this conclusion from his studies of oceanography.  
We would live in a submersible, go up and down as we please.  
Thus lead a life of luxury with the very greatest of ease.  
No problems of what to wear — a diving suit would suffice.  
No need for a refrigerator — deep-sea water's as cold as ice.  
A generator would supply the light, as well as the heat.  
You just throw out a net and catch all the fish you can eat.  
The protein would make us very healthy and strong.  
Now tell me, is there anything with such a life that you could say is wrong!

Highway in Baja California.

**South Pacific.** He went island-hopping across French Polynesia and made stops in Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, New Zealand, and Australia to lecture and investigate marine resources development programs, such as the impacts of fish poisoning upon native populations.

**Asia.** He toured Thailand and India as a lecturer and consultant in marine and coastal resources planning and development.

**Europe.** As a member of the National Academy of Engineering's Committee on Ocean Research, he worked with Great Britain, France, and Germany to encourage information exchange and to expand knowledge in the field of coastal zone management. A year later, he traveled through Great Britain, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, and The Netherlands on an NOAA-sponsored sponsored research

grant to study the impacts of North Sea oil exploration and development upon the coasts.



## A Little Taste of Aloha

In 1975, Ron made the decision to leave USC and run away to paradise — to direct the Sea Grant Program at the University of Hawaii in Mañoa (UH).

The Sea Grant programs at USC and Hawaii were different in that USC was dealing with the management of existing resources while Hawaii, made up of eight main islands rich in resources, needed to better plan its marine future. It was a challenge Ron plunged into head first.

Since Hawaii had one of the largest Sea Grant budgets in the nation, Ron was given more leeway in running the show. One of the first things he did was help negotiate the transfer of the Law of the Sea Institute from the University of Rhode Island to UH to undertake studies of international significance, such as seabed resources and international fishery treaties.

"Ron was a wonderful leader," said Jeremy Harris, Retired Mayor of the City and County of Honolulu, who — at the time — worked for Ron in the Sea Grant program. "He was inspiring and brought out the best in people. I remember that he would call us 'biopoliticians.' Instead of just being biologists, we took the various sciences we worked with at the university and applied them to a community setting. We had to make science and technology understandable to the public."

Some of the work they were involved in varied from increasing fishermen's catches to informing homeowners how to

## Water World...

Ron wanted people to "think wet." He would travel around the world advocating the various uses of the ocean and how it could benefit mankind. One of the things he used to say was that this planet should never have been called Earth. Instead, it should have been called Neptune — the water planet.

prevent coastal damage. According to Harris, most of the funding went towards research to improve aquaculture and fisheries.

In fact, aquaculture (the rearing of aquatic animals for food) became such an important component of Ron's work that he became Special Assistant to the Dean of the College of Tropical Agriculture at UH for aquaculture research and development in 1977.

One of his greatest accomplishments at the time was the creation of a statewide market for the aquaculture industry in Hawaii, representing more than 300 acres and \$5 million in investments.

His wife, Patricia, remembers that Ron had fun planning creative — and sneaky — activities to encourage people to expand their palettes of fish food sources in Hawaii. For instance, he would hold a reception in the evening in which Hawaiian girls in muumuus would walk around serving small bites of shark or the freshwater fish tilapia (considered a trash fish by Hawaiians) to guests who wouldn't realize at first what they were eating. Or else he would have different restaurants prepare the fish in several ways and have the fish arranged prettily at lunch for the curious to try.

## Helping Others Help Themselves

After spending 16 years devoted to teaching, Ron decided it was time to take a leap of faith. He needed to see if he could succeed on his own. It was the scariest decision he ever made. But he had to do it. He had to try.

In 1978, he ended his service as Director of Sea Grant in Hawaii and moved back to

## Living History...

While Ron was in the Philippines, he and other workshop attendees took a two-day field trip to the Lingayen gulf region. All around them was "rice country with the usual water buffalos lazing in the paddies or pulling the cultivators through the muddy plots," wrote Ron.

They went around the coast looking at things like mills, gold mines, and the remains of a recent mudslide. Then they went out to the beach where, according to Ron, "the Dutch, Japanese, and the Americans landed to capture and liberate the country. A real bit of history."

In fact, he couldn't help but feel awe while standing there at that battlefield. As a kid, he played soldier with his friends, pretending to fight at exotic locales only heard about in school or seen on film. "To finally stand at the place of which movies are made and heroes elevated, including John Wayne, makes me smile," he wrote. "Strange how my life seems to be working. I love it!"

## The Birthday Boy...

California. This time, he was going to work for himself.

So he became a consultant.

At first, it was a real struggle. According to Patricia, “Oceanography funds were reduced by Congress, and there was less emphasis on oceanography in general. So Ron regrouped and decided what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He had good people skills. He excelled at building programs. One of the first things he did on his own was help lay out the groundwork for the Marine Studies Institute at Dana Point. He didn’t get paid for it. He just helped. Then he got contracts with the United Nations and did work in the Philippines and Sri Lanka.”



*Ron celebrated life to its fullest — and loved a good party. He enjoyed having get-togethers and surrounding himself with friends and family. He also had his traditions, and you could count on him to deliver.*

*Every Thanksgiving, he baked pumpkin pies. Every Christmas, he displayed his collection of Santa Clauses and decorated the tree with beautiful glass ornaments. And every birthday, he had something special planned — whether it was going out to lunch to celebrate or hosting a great, big surprise party.*

*“My dad was the birthday guy,” said Ron’s son, Bryan Linsky. “He’d say everybody celebrates the holidays, but your birthday belongs to you. It’s your special day, a day you should be showered in gifts. He never forgot a birthday.”*

development. It was so hot in Sri Lanka that “trees were drying up all over town” and “kids with watering cans were trying to keep the flowers around the hotels alive,” Ron wrote. One of the highlights of working in Sri Lanka was that Ron got to meet with Arthur C. Clarke, the author of science fiction novels like *Space Odyssey*, to discuss Sri Lanka’s water future.

“We talked a lot about coral mining and tropical fish collecting and what it is doing to the environment,” wrote Ron, who pointed out that the reefs were being torn up and the coral used for concrete, so beaches were eroding. The meeting ended on a positive note, for they planned a seminar in which Ron, Clarke, and others would present “our thoughts on environmental

planning and coral mining.”

Even the Minister of Fisheries agreed to host the session.

## New Trini in Town

Ron’s work with the UN didn’t end with his adventures in the South Seas. In fact, he soon moved to the other side of the world — the Caribbean — to become the UN’s Chief Technical Advisor and, later, CEO of the Institute of Marine Affairs (IMA) in Trinidad & Tobago.

“As head of the UN team of experts, I had to

give advice,” Ron used to say. “As the Director of the Institute, I took my own advice. It was the best of both worlds.”

For two years, he worked hard to establish a marine institute in a developing country with diminishing offshore resources. While he was there, he built a laboratory, purchased an ocean-going ship, and established programs revolving around the fishing industry, coastal zone management, and contamination. He also introduced aquaculture as a viable resource.

Doon Ramsaroop, the former Deputy Director in charge of research at IMA, remembered Ron as an avid swimmer who loved to go turtle watching. “We had great fun together during our weekend snorkeling trips to the islands of the Dragon’s Mouth, off the northwestern tip of Trinidad,” he said. “Ron’s secret love, however, was for a small remote cove called Arnos Vale on Tobago’s Caribbean coast. Whenever time permitted, he and Patricia would escape for a couple of days to this idyllic retreat.”

He also remembers Ron as a warm-hearted person who truly cared about his colleagues. There were many a night that Ron and his wife would invite co-workers over for a homemade dinner and a game of Scrabble.

“I used to be amazed by his penchant for constructing outrageous words,” said

## Pupus and Beer...

*Jeremy Harris was just starting out as a biologist when Ron arrived at UH to replace the existing Director of Sea Grant. “Ron captured everyone’s heart immediately,” said Harris. “He was a likable guy who made everyone feel comfortable about the tasks ahead.”*

*He described Ron as a generalist who wasn’t content to deal with just one area of research. “Ron would talk about the biology of a species one minute,” said Harris, “then turn around and talk about thermodynamics the next. He liked the variety. It allowed him to get involved in all aspects of the ocean.”*

*One of Harris’ fondest memories of Ron’s time at UH was when the two of them would go to the local grill and have appetizers Hawaiian-style (known as “pupus”). They wouldn’t order from a menu. Instead, the waitress would bring out a big platter of fish and steak (which she purchased with her own money) and “we’d eat the food with chopsticks and watch TV, paying only for the beer and tip” said Harris. “It’s old-style Hawaiian hospitality.”*

For his first job with the United Nations (UN), Ron was asked to develop and conduct a workshop on developing coastal and offshore resources in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Representatives from 13 countries (such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and South Korea) attended, prompting Ron to remark in a letter home that “This meeting has really been an experience and an opportunity that few people get — working with so many nations.”

He made a lot of connections on that trip, including one that paid off by sending him to Sri Lanka twice to serve as a consultant and UN rep in coastal resource



## Royal Treatment...

*One of Ron’s oldest friends is M.L. Prachaksilp “Pee Wee” Tongyai, a great-, great-grandson of King Rama-IV — the very same King of Siam romanticized in The King and I and Anna and the King.*

*Tongyai first met Ron when Ron was still with the Floating Lab Program. In fact, Tongyai — then a Scientific Research Officer with the Marine Fisheries Division in Thailand — contacted Ron initially to evaluate the program and see if it could apply to Thailand as “the Fisheries Division had many large research vessels that might be good ‘floating schools’ for students and a new generation marine fishermen.”*

*“Ron managed to find funds to finance my airfare to California,” said Tongyai, who stayed as a guest in Ron’s home for 10 days while he visited. “We had a wonderful time on land and sea. Ron had a knack for turning dull scientific procedures and facts into Disney-type entertainment, with color, wit, and laughter!”*

*After Tongyai returned to Thailand, he used what Ron taught him to train fishermen and construct both a Marine Biology Research Center and Aquarium in Phuket. Another aquarium was also established in Bang Saen Beach for outreach purposes.*

*Years later, when Ron visited Thailand on behalf of the U.S. State Department, he had the opportunity to meet the mother of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. According to Tongyai, “Ron chatted with the Princess Mother concerning ecology and the environment, including the conservation and distribution of water resources for various ‘competing’ and ‘conflicting’ uses.”*

*No one will ever know if that conversation produced any concrete results, but Tongyai was pleased to point out that, in June 2006, for the 60th Anniversary Celebration of H.M. the King on the Throne of Thailand, the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, presented the first UN Human Development Lifetime Achievement Award to the King “for His decades-long support of national development initiatives, including Royal Rain Making to supplement natural rain for irrigation during long periods of drought, especially during El Niño years.”*

## To China, With Love...

Ron deeply admired Asian culture. There was something about the food, history, and attitude that appealed to him. Japan was among his favorites. He loved every minute he spent in Okinawa while he was an army “spy.” The license plate on his Cadillac read MIZU SAN, which is Japanese for “Mr. Water.” Even his wife was part Japanese! But there was one Asian country that Ron loved even more than Japan, and that was China.

“Sometimes Ron would joke that he looked Chinese,” said Ron’s best friend, David Hsu, M.D. “He loved Chinese food, every kind. He even talked about retiring there. In the last 15 years, we went to China at least six or seven times together. He was very interested in China and its resources.”

“Once, he went to China to learn more about the Three Gorges Project on the Yellow River,” added Hsu. “He was invited to dinner and was asked to help the Chinese get a loan for \$30 billion U.S. Ron said that was slightly above his budget, but he was willing to help. Since then, he involved himself in Chinese water resources issues. He helped host Chinese officials who would come to the U.S. to tour and learn, or would invite them to visit. In the last three years, he worked hard to get U.S. delegates to China. I’m happy that NWRI will continue to pursue this.”

Ramsaroop. “When challenged, he would insist that the word existed. Of course, on most occasions, it could not be found in the dictionary. To his credit, though, he always took his losses at Scrabble quite graciously. It was clear to me that he played Scrabble not to win, but purely to enjoy the game and have fun.”

## The Institute Without Walls

In 1991, Ron’s life changed again. He was selected to become the founding Executive Director of NWRI, a non-profit organization devoted to creating new

sources of water through research and technology. Much like his work many years earlier at USC, Ron had to build the program from scratch — a program that was based on finding and leveraging funding from outside sources.

NWRI wasn’t about ocean water or aquaculture, which Ron had mostly been dealing with. It was about all aspects of water, from drinking water to recycled water to desalted water to the value of water. Ron loved the diversity and challenge of working with the brand-new Institute, and spent the next 15 years — the longest he ever

worked in any one setting — devoted to making NWRI one of the most reputable and active water-research organizations in the world.

He referred to NWRI as the “institute without walls” because NWRI itself never conducted any research. Instead, NWRI found “the best and the brightest” to do the work for it.

From publishing the first guidelines on using ultraviolet disinfection in water and wastewater treatment to encouraging the use of nanotechnology in membrane applications, Ron was known for his pioneering spirit and willingness to fund new and exciting technology to explore its benefit to the water industry. Because of his can-do attitude, NWRI was able to support over 160 projects throughout the years.

In fact, at the time of his passing, NWRI was one of the largest water research institutes in the U.S.

## Good Bye, Ron

“Live life” was Ron’s attitude.

He loved his work and he loved his family and friends, and not for a single second did he ever think of slowing down and taking it easy. He didn’t want to have any regrets and he did what he could to fulfill his dreams, whether that was traveling to far-off lands like Tasmania for vacation or working with the Office of the President of the United States to get water into the heart and minds of people everywhere.

He was not afraid to try. And he was always, always optimistic. Even until the very end.

After fighting the disease for 6 years, Ron passed away on August 14, 2005, of myelodysplastic syndrome, a bone marrow ailment, at USC’s Norris Cancer Center. He was 71 years old.



Part 1 of Ron’s biography can be found in the Fall 2005 (Vol. 14, No. 3) Briefings newsletter, and covers everything from his brief stints as an army spy and radio celebrity to his close encounters with rabid bats in Costa Rica and his endeavors to take students to sea on the Floating Lab. Copies can be downloaded at [www.NWRI-USA.org](http://www.NWRI-USA.org).

## A Man and His Dog...

Ron was a dog lover. And his favorite dogs were Jack Russell terriers, which are perky, energetic, and friendly creatures — very much like Ron himself.

Ron’s dog, 11-year old Raffles, was named after a favorite hotel in Singapore called the “Sir Raffles Huxley.” In fact, Raffles’ full name is Sir Raffles Huxley Bjur Linsky, and he’s just as pampered as his name implies. Ron used to say, “Raffles doesn’t live with us; we live in his dog house,” and loved to talk about his dog’s latest caper. One of the things Ron enjoyed most with his dog was chasing off the crows in the garden. Raffles got good exercise and Ron ensured the flora and fauna in his backyard were protected from the loud birds.

As much as he loved his dog, Ron was a little jealous of him because Raffles got to stay home all day with Patricia. In fact, Ron was fond of saying that when his time came, he wanted to be “reincarnated as a Jack Russell terrier in the home of Patricia Linsky.”



## For the Family...

Ron had lived such a rich, full life. He’d traveled the world and seven seas. His greatest passion was his work, which never felt like a job to him. He loved to learn and he loved to teach, no matter how old the student. And he made new friends everywhere he went.

But the most important thing in his life was not how many wonderful places he visited or what new program he developed, but rather something much more dear: his wife, Patricia, who absolutely made him glow; his children and their spouses — Bryan and Helene Linsky, Todd and Jeannene Linsky, Maureen and Gerd Rausch, and Christopher Madden — who he always supported, no matter what; and his grandchildren — Jacob and Evan Linsky, Alexandra and Harrison Linsky, and Amelie Rausch — who he would talk about nonstop. It was obvious he was a proud Papa.

To those who loved Ron so much, we know how much it hurts to lose him. He always made us feel like family and, just like family, we want you to know that we will always be there for you. Thank you for sharing Ron with us. And thank you for letting us share his memory.