

FLEET OBSOLETE – PRESERVING OUR MARITIME HISTORY

Shortly after “locking down” the Spring '09 issue of Bone Yard Boats, I was contacted by Robert Iannucci, the founder and patron of Fleet Obsolete, a non-profit organization headquartered in Kingston, NY and dedicated to the preservation and promotion of maritime history. In addition to the decommissioned U.S. Army tugboat, the Gowanus Bay, the “fleet” consists of four WWII-era “Patrol Torpedo” boats.



PT-728 UNDERWAY (Photo courtesy of Robert Iannucci)

The 77' to 80' PTs of the 1940s were constructed principally of wood by U.S. builders ELCO of Bayonne, NJ, Higgins Industries of New Orleans, and Huckins Yacht Corp of Jacksonville, FL. Manned by a crew of 14, they were shallow draft, heavily armed, and highly maneuverable even at high speed. Although sometimes modified by a resourceful crew, a common armament configuration included a 20mm Oerlikon cannon at stern, two 12.7mm twin M2 or two 7.6mm Lewis machine guns on rotating turrets, and two or four 21-inch torpedo tubes carrying Mark 8 torpedoes. They were typically powered by three massive 12-cylinder, 1200hp, liquid-cooled, gas-guzzling Packard engines burning high octane aviation fuel – and lots of it! – allowing them to reach speeds of 50 knots. Rumor has it that their stealth, power, and weaponry caused one Japanese soldier to describe the PT in his diary as “the monster that roars, flaps it wings, and shoots torpedoes in all directions.”



ELCO-BUILT PT-48 ARRIVED IN KINGSTON, NY, ON JAN 23, 2009

Fleet Obsolete's PT-459, PT-615, PT-728, and the group's most recent acquisition – the PT-48 – are in various stages of restoration, with the PT-728 being fully restored and available for charter. The group's websites (www.pt728.com & www.fleetobsolete.org) contain some fabulous photos and details of our WWII US Naval history, including log book highlights, images of the actual pages from the ship's logs scanned from the National Archives, and declassified Action Reports of three of their vessels. As the son of a WWII navy veteran, an avid reader of naval history, and raised on episodes of McHale's Navy, being introduced to Fleet Obsolete – and its noble mission – was like finding buried treasure!

According to the Fleet Obsolete press release, the PT-48 is the “last remaining World War II 77 ft. Elco Patrol Torpedo Boat.” Her heroic war record, as chronicled in the pages of her log book, includes being transported from the Brooklyn Navy Yard to Balboa on the deck of the USS KITTY HAWK during the final two weeks of 1941 following the attack on Pearl Harbor. On August 27, 1942 she was hauled aboard the USS LAPPANNOCK and splashed at Great Road, Naumea, New Caledonia one month later. From here, her heroic tale really begins.

On October 14th, she “fired 300 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition at Japanese destroyer. Destroying searchlight.” On November 7th, she “Fired four torpedoes at large Japanese destroyer or cruiser ... observed two explosions on same ship.” The following day, “Two torpedoes passed under ship, three torpedoes passed under bow. Fired two after torpedoes at surfaced submarine...”

On the first anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor – December 7, 1942 – PT-48 “...received 4 Mark VIII 3D torpedoes...” and proceeded “...underway for patrol.” At 11:25pm, “Sighted three or more enemy destroyers in column course 120°T speed about 35 knots, reported contact and increased speed and altered course to 120°T.” As PT-48 was engaging the enemy, “Port engine stopped.” [Now, we all know that engine trouble can be inconvenient on a sunny, Sunday afternoon boat outing, but engine trouble in pitch darkness with guns blazing? I think I'll try to avoid that one!] The entry continues, “...returned under cover of smoke toward Savo Island under fire from the destroyers.”



ATTACHING PROPS TO PT-728 FOR MAY '09 LAUNCH

At midnight, the PT-48 “...anchored bow to beach and stern to sea off Savo Island south beach trying to restart port engine.” The entry for 4:15am on December 8th reads, “...passed a towline to PT-109 and was pulled free of the beach. Underway on two engines proceeding to base.” PT-109 was the boat skippered by future U.S. President John F. Kennedy. As Mr. Iannucci accurately stated in a press release referring to the PT-48, “History required us to save it from the bulldozers.”

PT 48 was donated to Fleet Obsolete by Bob and Marsha Hostetler, of Fruitland Park, FL, after owning her for approximately 10 years. She had been cut down to 59 feet and used as a dinner cruise boat, and then lay in Florida “for several years in a deteriorating state.” Although in poor condition now, the Fleet Obsolete crew is planning to restore her to her 1942 combat specs, which includes an original length of 77 feet. A custom steel cradle, designed by Chief Engineer Tim Ivory, was built in Kingston, NY, disassembled, and then transported to Florida. According to the group's website, “The boat was raised off the ground with an air bag system and the cradle was then reassembled under the boat's fragile hull. The boat was then gently lowered on to the cradle. Tim designed this cradle so that each piece weighed no more than 200 pounds requiring only 2 men to lift.” PT-48 arrived in Kingston on Jan 23, 2009 to join the other vessels of Fleet Obsolete.

The PT-459, awaiting restoration, is a Higgins boat with a documented European combat history. In fact, her log entry from August 8, 1944 reads: “Sighted four unidentified vessels. Formed right echelon and made a starboard run. Commenced firing. Proceeded away from enemy boats. Received hull and engine damage from action. Enemy shell holed starboard side of engine room 2 feet from waterline and pierce exhaust stacks on starboard engine. Received no personnel casualties. Expended 1000 rounds of .50 cal. ammunition 50 rounds of 20mm ammunition and 88 rounds of 40mm ammunition.” The PT-615, an 80' ELCO, is also awaiting restoration.

Fleet Obsolete's fully restored Vosper-designed PT-728 – built in the Annapolis Yacht Yard in 1945 – actually appeared in the television series McHale's Navy, as well as a History Channel program about the role of PT boats in WWII. She will be making several appearances this summer at boating events in the Northeast – check the website for dates and locations (www.pt728.com & www.fleetobsolete.org). Coast Guard inspected, licensed to carry passengers, and captained by Tom Whyte, PT-728 is also available for private charters. It seems that the only...