



Submitted photo courtesy of the Duncans

Jack Duncan reflects on his PT boat service.

# Jack's last ride

By Buck Dopp // Special to News-Herald

Jack and Marlene Duncan will bring their family together for Fleet Week in Portland, Ore., where Jack will celebrate his 90th birthday cruising the Willamette River on PT-658, the last operational Motor Torpedo (PT) boat. It will not be their first ride on the boat. Jack and Marlene have sailed down the Willamette on PT-658 four times in the past five years.

The Duncan's love affair with the boat began in the early 90s when Jack's daughter, Jill, brought him to the restoration site where 12 former PT boat sailors dedicated themselves to restoring PT-658. The veterans' goal was to get the boat to function and appear as it did in 1945 when it was built by Higgins Industries in New Orleans.

Jack was skeptical at first. "I met a bunch of the guys on the barge who showed me around. I kept my thoughts to myself that it was landfill material - too far gone to resurrect."

It might not have been love at first sight, but Jack and Marlene's respect for the work grew until they became believers in the renovation of the 78-foot boat and gave the project generous financial support. The Duncans call the 12 old salts who started the effort - and those who continue it - miracle workers.

"That resurrection is the real story," Jack said. "She's (PT-658) looking just as she did in 1945."

Jack Duncan is no stranger to PT boats.

He enlisted at 17 - when it required his mother's written consent - and the Navy promoted him to E-4 before his 18th birthday and assigned him to man the torpedoes on PT-103 in the Pacific.

"The Navy became Jack's family," Marlene said. Jack retired as a Master Chief Gunner's Mate 43 years later, after



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Buck Dopp photo/Special to News-Herald

Jack and Marlene Duncan.

accumulating 20 years on active duty during five periods of recall and 23 as a drilling reservist.

"The first torpedoes, at the beginning of the war, were unreliable and slow. They could only travel at 27 knots," Jack said. "We were all prepared for World War I. Unfortunately we were fighting World War II."

Jack's PT boat fought in the Solomon Islands campaigns. He heard there was a rich guy who commanded a PT boat in the same area whose boat was rammed and sunk by the Japanese destroyer Amagiri. Jack never met him, but the

"rich guy" later became the President of the United States - John F. Kennedy.

Crewed by two officers and 14 enlisted men, PT boats were made of laminated mahogany, and held together by 400,000 screws, inspiring the nickname, Plywood Navy. PT boats delivered communications, transported commandos and escorted ships. Powered by three Packard marine engines, PT boats could reach speeds exceeding 41 knots (47 mph).

PT boats attacked, disabled and destroyed much larger enemy ships such

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as cruisers and battleships, which earned them another nickname: The Mosquito Fleet. They may have been smaller, but PT boats were 50 tons of fast fighting fury, armed with torpedoes, rockets, twin 50-caliber machine guns, grenades, depth charges and canons.

During the Vietnam conflict, Jack served as the Squadron Master Chief on PTF-26 (the PT boats of the Vietnam-era) from 1972-1976 giving him the undisputed claim of being the only sailor to crew on a PT boat in World II and Vietnam.

Marlene appreciates the



Courtesy photo

**Maury Hooper, one of the original 12 who refurbished PT658, with Ashley Korslien of Channel 8 News and Jack Duncan.**

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history behind PT-658 and loves to see the pleasure Jack has aboard with the crew.

"We've been as one for 46 years, with 14 of those years 'assigned' the role of Command Master Chief's wife - the go-to gal for

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enlisted wives, so I became Navy," she explained.

Jack's birthday rides at Fleet Week from June 2-7, will be his last.

Marlene is almost 80 and he will be 90

The logistics of getting to Fleet Week and attending the activities have gotten more difficult for them each year. Their rides may stop, but their donations will not.

Jack points out that PT-658's refurbishment and ongoing maintenance have continued without the backing of a major sponsor - another miracle. Small donations have kept the work afloat.

Jack encourages every-

one he knows to consider donating to PT-658 as a way to honor the 60,000 men who served on PT boats and to keep their history alive for future generations.

"We PT boaters are a dying breed," Jack said. "We are two few and feeble to hold reunions any longer. Please don't let the exploits of PT boats die with us."

The jaunty old sailor, who fires off metaphors as fast and furious as he used to launch torpedoes, has only one 90th birthday wish: to raise money for his beloved PT-658.

To make a tax-deductible donation go to [savetheptboatinc.com](http://savetheptboatinc.com).

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