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THE SAGA OF PT 305

A boat goes from war relic to historical artifact.



Joe Brannan

The crew of PT 305 pose for a photo in 1945 in Livorno, Italy. Allan Purdy of Columbia, the boat's commanding officer, is seen in the back row on the far left. Joe Brannan, the gunner's mate, is in the front row on the far left. PT 305 was then known as the USS Sudden Jerk.

By [Terry Ganey](#)

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When Joe Brannan went back to war in December 1944, he took along a Kodak 35 mm camera and shot more than 100 photos of American Navy PT boat operations in the Mediterranean Sea.



Photo by [Parker Eshelman](#)

Allan Purdy was one of several commanding officers who served on PT 305.



Photo by Joe Brannan

Purdy, right, and Executive Officer Bleecker Morse man PT 305. The two Nazi swastika emblems indicate the boat was credited with sinking two enemy vessels.



Robert Crow

After PT 305 was decommissioned in 1945, it was extensively modified and operated as a tour boat in New York before being moved to the Chesapeake Bay, where it was used to harvest oysters.



National World War II Museum

The hull of PT 305 is hoisted in a sling in preparation for a recent move into a storage building at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, where the boat will be restored.

Brannan helped document a little-known chapter of World War II, when U.S. and British naval forces collaborated to block German coastal vessels from resupplying the German army in Italy. Brannan's photos have become especially noteworthy because he served on board PT 305, one of the last surviving combat vessels of its kind. PT 305 is now being refurbished for display at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

Brannan's photos also document a local connection to that boat. Allan Purdy, a Columbia resident and former professor and administrator at the University of Missouri, was the commanding officer of PT 305 when Gunner's Mate Brannan first came on board.

The 66-year saga of PT 305 covers a full circle, from New Orleans, where it was manufactured in 1943; to the northern Mediterranean, where it saw combat; to New York harbor, where it was decommissioned; to the Chesapeake Bay, where it served for years as an oyster boat; to Galveston, Texas, where a group of volunteers first tried to refurbish it; and now back to New Orleans, where museum officials plan to have it fully restored to original operating condition.

The museum sought out PT 305 because it is one of the last remaining examples of a boat manufactured by Higgins Industries, which was once based in New Orleans.

"We intend this boat to be a memorial to all the men who served on PT boats especially, and in a more general way to all of our veterans," said Tom Czekanski, the museum's director of collections and exhibits. "One of the things special to me about it is that it's one of the few combat veteran PT boats."

"A GOOD RABBIT'S FOOT"

Small, fast and bristling with torpedoes and automatic weapons, the wooden patrol torpedo boats of World War II sometimes proved lethal in close encounters with the enemy in both the Pacific and European theaters. Perhaps best-known is PT 109, commanded by future President John F. Kennedy during the Solomon Islands campaign against the Japanese.

A Japanese destroyer rammed Kennedy's boat, and two sailors died. Kennedy was later awarded a medal for helping save the survivors of his crew.

A book and a movie, “They Were Expendable,” depicted PT boat operations during the defense of the Philippine islands. Less well-known is the use of the boats against German and Italian forces in the Mediterranean.

U.S. and British planes had bombed bridges, roads and rail lines, and the only way the Germans could supply their army in Italy was through shipping along the Mediterranean coast from France. Because the allies controlled the air in the daylight, the German supply convoys moved at night, and it was the PT boats’ job to intercept them from their bases in Bastia on the island of Corsica and later from Livorno, Italy.

“Every night there were convoys of eight, 10, 12, 15 whatever barges loaded with supplies by the Germans going down the coast of Italy,” Purdy said in an interview. “I had a very specific objective, and that was to stop the supply of food and ammunition that was going down to the German army.”

Purdy was one of several commanding officers who served on PT 305 during its service in the Mediterranean. Enlisted men rotated through assignments on the boat, as well. During its career, the boat had several nicknames — “Barfly,” “Half Hitch” and “Sudden Jerk” — and it was credited with sinking two German supply barges.

On the night of April 23, 1945, PT 305 and another boat helped sink an Italian patrol boat, according to “At Close Quarters, PT boats in the United States Navy.” German forces in Italy surrendered six days later.

Mitch Cirlot, whose father, Joe Cirlot, served as a motor machinist’s mate in the first PT 305 crew, said the boat also was used to put British commandos ashore on the enemy’s occupied coast and then go in later to retrieve them. Cirlot, who lives in Ocean Springs, Miss., has the boat’s original flag and commissioning pennant, which his father brought back from the war.

Brannan, who had served on PT boats in the Pacific in the first two years of the war, said the boats in the Mediterranean would patrol in groups of three. They would leave their bases in the early evening in time to get to the German shipping lanes well after dark. He recalled how PT 305 was hit twice in one night by British planes that bombed it by mistake.

“We weren’t expecting anything,” said Brannan. “We didn’t even know it was a British plane until later when they reported attacking two Italian boats at the same place we were.”

Brannan was not hurt in the mistaken attack.

“I always had a good rabbit’s foot,” he said. “Every time something happened, I was somewhere else.”

THE OYSTER BOAT

When the war in Europe ended, Brannan returned to the United States on a transport that also carried PT 305 and other boats that were to be overhauled in New York for preparation for later deployment against Japan. But then the war ended, and PT 305, along with several other boats from the Mediterranean, were sold as surplus.

Purdy returned to Columbia, where he and his wife, Vivian, raised three boys and a girl. He worked at the MU School of Agriculture, the Extension Division and became an expert in helping students finance their college education. Purdy turned 95 in July. Brannan used the GI Bill to obtain a degree in electrical engineering. He and his wife, Bobbye, raised four daughters. Brannan retired from the U.S. Department of Energy in Denver and now lives in Aurora, Colo. Brannan will be 87 next month.

PT 305 was adapted to civilian life, too. Once sold by the government, it was extensively modified. The biggest change took place when the boat was shortened. Because the Coast Guard required a captain's license to operate boats longer than 65 feet, the 78-foot PT 305 was cut off at the stern, shortening the boat to 60 feet, 7 inches. Its three powerful, gas-guzzling Packard engines were replaced by two diesels. A chart house, benches and canopy were installed on the deck. For a time PT 305 went by the name Captain David Jones, carrying sightseers in New York.

Between 1988 and 2000, the boat was used in the oyster industry on Chesapeake Bay, said Robert Crow, whose father and uncle bought the boat in New York. With the two diesels, top speed was 12 knots, approximately 14 mph. With the three Packard engines, a PT boat could reach 40 knots, or about 46 mph.

In an e-mail, Crow said the boat was used to dredge oyster spat (baby oysters) from the bottom of the Chesapeake and move it to habitat more conducive to oyster growth. Crow said the boat nearly capsized once because the deck was overloaded with spat and heavy mud. PT 305 fared better than boats from the Pacific theater. After valuable equipment was removed, most were burned on the beach in the Philippines. As a result, few PT boats remain from the World War II era. In 2001, the Defenders of America Naval Museum in Galveston, Texas, acquired PT 305 from the Crow brothers in hopes of restoring it. "They had tons and tons of pig iron in the bottom of the boat for ballast," said James Trousdale, a leader of the Defenders of America organization. "When you put all the oyster shells on the top of the boat, it was top-heavy."

Trousdale authenticated the PT 305 as a Higgins-built boat by finding a stamp underneath the deck in the bow section. The boat was shipped by truck from Crisfield, Md., to Galveston, but the restoration project stalled for lack of funds. Two years ago, ownership was transferred to the National World War II Museum, where the gray hull of PT 305 now sits in a cradle awaiting restoration.

It took a volunteer group in Portland, Ore., a dozen years to rebuild a PT 658, a World War II-era PT boat there. Some of the leftover parts from the Portland project, including the aft 20-foot section of a cannibalized PT boat in Vancouver, Wash., have been donated for the New Orleans project.

"They have a lot higher budget than we do, but they also have much more work that needs to be done," said Jerry Gilmartin, a member of the board of directors of Save the PT Boat in Portland. "I think they will spend easily more than \$1 million on that boat to fix it up properly."

Czekanski said the museum is searching for a corporate donor who could supply between \$3 million and \$5 million to restore PT 305 to original condition. Depending on the funding, Czekanski said, it will take three years to complete the project. "This is the most expensive and most complex artifact we have found," Czekanski said. "You can't get it done without the funding. Being a museum, we have to be patient."

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