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Back on PT patrol

A World War II veteran gets a surprise and an honor as part of his 90th birthday celebration

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You're a 23-year-old PT boat skipper when World War II ends.

In September 1945, on Samar, Philippines, you watch the farewell inferno: dozens of the wooden "patrol torpedo" boats, including yours, dragged together on the beach like so many logs on a fire and, after being stripped of any useful equipment, doused with diesel and set aflame.

This is a boat you lived on, fought on, watched men die on. Gone. You feel like a cowboy having to put down his horse.

You return home to Eugene, where your wife, Gloria, has clipped the articles from the local paper, The Register-Guard, about Lt. William H. Skade leading missions into "the mine-infested Marudu Bay ..."

You and Gloria move to the house where you still live on Emerald Street, south of the University of Oregon.

Son Hank is born in 1948, daughters Dorothy in 1950 and Patricia in 1956. Thirty-seven years with Allstate Insurance. Retirement in 1987 at age 66.

You do a little fishing here and there, own a few boats. But nothing like that 78-foot wooden boat you piloted during the war, a craft with three 11/2-ton Packard V-12 engines whose vibrations, if you close your eyes, you can still almost feel.

Not that you mention those years to anyone. You're like a lot of folks in your generation: just did what you needed to do, and got on with things when the war ended.

Still, when you find, in the attic, the tattered flag that once flew from the bridge of PT 143, you were honored that the kids had it framed. You hang it in your den, the edges frayed as much by time as by the way it once whipped above you in boat speeds of up to 40 knots.

Meanwhile, you haven't heard what some of your generational PT peers are up to 90 miles north, in Portland. How they've come across one of only 11 PT boats that survived the war, and trucked it from California to Oregon to restore it.

Never mind that, since the war, it had survived a fire and sunk twice. "You never tell a bunch of old PT boaters that it can't be done," one of them tells The Oregonian.

In 2004, 13 years of volunteer blood, sweat and tears after the project begins, the mainly 80-something guys and a few others proudly motor PT 658 up the Willamette River in a dedication ceremony.

It is the only authentically restored, operational U.S. Navy PT boat in the world. But of the 16 men who originally began working to restore it, eight don't live long enough to enjoy the day.

A thousand of your aging fellow World War II veterans are dying each day. A few months ago, Gloria reminds you that you'll soon be 90 yourself, which is a long way from that fresh-faced kid who'd heard the Navy wanted "athletic types" for PT boats so wore two extra sweaters beneath your coat for your interview.

In the same breath, Gloria mentions something about the PT boat in Portland. She and the "kids" — now 62, 61 and 55 — want you to see it Sept. 24 as part of your birthday celebration.

Oh, the grandchildren are coming, too, 13 family members in all, three generations, from Oklahoma, California and Seattle.

On Saturday morning, your heart quickens when you see PT 658, moored at Portland's Swan Island Pier; it's just like the Higgins boat you trained on in New Orleans in 1943.

The crew hands out life preservers. The whole family is seated on the boat. You're given an honorary medal.

Then up stands Jerry Gilmartin, a 50-year-old retired Navy man who's the PT project's curator. He still can't believe that, though only 36 boats of this class were made, there's an actual captain of one in his midst.

He welcomes the family, all decked out in their matching Bill Skade "90 Years and Going Strong" T-shirts, then tells you the bad news.

"The captain," he says, "has called in sick."

He looks at you. Everyone but you knows what he's going to say next.

"Lt. Skade," he says, "how would you feel about running the boat today?"

You're a bit confused here. "What, you're actually going to get under way?"

Gilmartin nods yes. Your daughter, Patricia, worries that you'll decline. Please, dad, say you will.

"It's been a long time," you say — 66 years to be exact — "but sure."

You're on the water for almost an hour, which, your children say, is about how long your smile lasted.

When you were at the helm, sometime before back-on-the-dock birthday cupcakes and before you donate your well-pressed captain's uniform to the nonprofit group that restored the boat, your son Hank asks the question.

"How does it feel, Dad?"

Your hands are wrapped around the mahogany wheel.

"Just like old times," you say, then return your gaze to mine-infested Marudu Bay.

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