MEMORIES OF MY TORPEDO BOAT (PT) DUTY

Last month (February, 1991) our cruise ship, the Ocean Pearl, was anchored for two days off the island of Bali in the waters of the Java Sea. During those same days the ship's radio brought news of the approaching end to the Persian Gulf war. The combination of the location and the end of a war brought back a rush of memories of another day in nearby waters when another war came to an end.

Just to the north of Bali, across the Java Sea, lies the Makassar Strait, bounded by Borneo (now Kalimantan) to the west, and by the Celebes (now Suluwesi) to the east. There was a time, not so long ago, when these now tranquil waters were the scene of violent warfare; where more than twenty warships of the American, British, Australian, New Zealand, and Japanese fleets were sunk in battle and lie, even now,resting and rusting on the "ironbound bottom."

As you go north from the Java Sea into the Makassar Strait with the east coast of Borneo on your port side, you come to a small, oil-rich island of Tarakan. A part of Borneo, Tarakan was a bloody backwater of World War II. The Australians stalked the Japanese troops through the jungle, while Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 36 patrolled the coastlines and the rivers that ran inland to the villages of the Dyaks, the storied "headhunters" of Borneo.

On August 15, 1945, I was the commander of PT (for Patrol Torpedo) Boat 529, one of the twelve boats that made up Squadron 36. That day brought the news of the end of World War II, and the realization that we were going to make it home alive. On the deck of the Ocean Pearl, forty five years later, the memories of Guadacanal, the Russells, New Guinea, Leyte Gulf, Lingayen Gulf, and Borneo came back.

Perhaps those memories are worth saving. Perhaps not. But we will never know unless I leave a record of them. So what follows is my best recollection of my PT experience -- the boats that took us "in harm's way," the men that manned them and the war we fought.

The PT Boats: Construction, Armament, Missions

The PT boats of the U. S. Navy in World War II (also known as just "Torpedo Boats" or Motor Torpedo Boats) were very special boats, built for very special missions. They were 80 feet long from bow to stern with a 20 foot beam (width) at the widest point. All of the combat PTs were wooden boats -- the hull was double-planked mahogany; the entire superstructure was a combination of planking and plywood. The only armor plating was a thin sheet around a portion of the bridge.

Power was supplied by three 1500 H.P. Packard V12 engines driving three 30" propellors. We carried 3,000 gallons of high test aviation gasoline in three tanks -- a flat tank in the bilge and two vertical wing tanks mounted within the bulkheads on either side of the boat. All tanks were located just ahead of the engine compartment. While underway, a Motor Machinist Mate (MoMM) was stationed in the engine compartment on a seat within arms reach of all three engine controls. While the MoMM shifted the engines in and out of gear, all speed control and shifting commands came from the bridge.

Below decks, and starting from the bow, there was a head and anchor line locker, then an eight bunk crew's quarters, then a mid-ships area with two officer cabins (with adjoining head!) on the port side and a galley and compact table to starboard. A ladder led up from the galley area to the chart house where the navigation gear, radio, and later the radar screen was located. Abaft (behind) the mid-ships area was the "day room" with four more bunks -- and positioned directly over and between the 3,000 gallons of gas! Behind the day room was the engine compartment and behind that was the "lazarette" with access to the rudders and storage space. Externally mounted at the stern were the six exhaust pipes and mufflers (controlled from the bridge).

Topside it was all the bridge, torpedoes, and guns -- and no life boats. Our primary weapon was the torpedo. On the 109 boat, we had four of them, mounted in tubes, and fired by a black powder shell (it looked like a large shotgun shell) mounted at the rear of the tube. They were fired electrically from the bridge -- or manually at the tube by a torpedoman stationed there during an attack as a backup. On the 529 we had aerial type torpedoes mounted in side racks and literally dropped over the side via a special rack and electrical impulse. On the stern of the early boats (109) we had a 20mm gun, two depth charges, and one blessed smoke generator. On port and starboard sides we had a twin 50 cal. machine gun swivel turrent, and on the bow, another 20mm. Later boats (529) had a 40mm on the stern in lieu of the 20mm. Finally, during the last half of my second tour (on the 529) we had 5" rocket launchers mounted on port and starboard sides just forward of the torpedo racks. All of this armament was fully manned during an attack and was directed from the bridge.

Our motto was taken from John Paul Jones. "Give me a fast ship for tonight I go in harm's way." Our missions lived up to our motto. The primary mission was to intercept enemy shipping, be it a warship, transport, or supply barge. This was carried out almost entirely at night -- a muffled approach under cover of darkness, a maximum strike, followed by a special tactic called "getting the hell out of here," often behind that blessed smoke screen. Beyond the primary

mission, there were many special tasks, from landing and scouting parties, to sea rescues, to joy rides for VIPs.

From V7 School to PT Training to Squadron Five

My PT experience started at the V7 Naval Officer Training School in Chicago. I enlisted in the Navy in the summer of 1941 and was called to duty in the V7 school in January,1942. The opening months of the war did not go well for our country. Japanese forces over ran American and British positions throughout S. E. Asia and threatened northern Australia. With the Philippines under heavy attack, a squadron of U. S. PT boats under the command of Cmdr. John Bulkeley carried out a number of heroic missions in the northern Philippines, including the evacuation of General MacArthur and his family. The PT exploits received wide publicity in the U. S. media during the same months I was in V7 school (see the book and movie They Were Expendable).

The V7 trainees were known as the "90 day wonders" as the Navy attempted to turn largely land-locked young men into sea-going naval officers in just 90 days. By April, 1942 we were nearing the end of the 90 days and were receiving our orders for our first duty. My orders assigned me to a "local defense school" in San Francisco, probably preparing for harbor security somewhere on the east or west coast. During the same week, openings for volunteers for PT boat duty were announced at morning muster. With the news of the successful missions of the Bulkeley boats in the Philippines fresh in our minds, and the vision (opportunity) to take our own boat into battle within a few months before us, several of us instantly stepped forward. It was a snap decision I have never regretted. But I must add a somber note. Among my PT memorabilia is a picture the five new officers that stepped forward that morning and wound up in Squadron 5 (taken on leave in New York prior to shipping out). John, Duck, and Sid were all killed in action in the Solomons; Ray went home with a "Section Eight" (a psychological discharge); and I, a very lucky man, survived the sinking of the 112 boat to tell this tale.

We went directly from V7 school to the PT training center at Melville, R.I. -- just outside of Newport. There we met the new PTer's -- officers and enlisted men -- all volunteers from several Navy schools and bases. The Navy had three months to get us ready for action via a combination of classroom study and "hands on" training on the Melville based boats. The enlisted men (the "ratings") concentrated on their specialties -- guns, torpedoes, navigational gear, engines. In addition to all of the above specialties, the officer-trainees added boat operation, patrol procedures, mission strategy and tactics, and command responsibility.It was a busy time between daytime study and night patrol exercises out at sea off the coast of Rhode Island.

The Melville months passed quickly and it was soon time for duty assignments. As I recall, our Melville "class" was the second to go through Melville PT training. About half the class was assigned to the newly formed Squadron 5 with the other half going somewhat later to the next squadron (6). Those of us in the fateful picture mentioned above all headed for "Ron" 5, then outfitting in the Brooklyn Navy Yard (New York City area).

Now it was time to get to work. I was assigned to PT 109 as the executive officer. The boat skipper (commander) was an officer from the prior Melville class (Jack ??). The crew was largely new recruits (some with special schooling) plus two men with prior navy service but not on the PTs (the Quartermaster (charts and navigation) and the senior Motor Machinist Mate, MoMM, who had been through the Packard engine school. We had eleven men aboard the 109 -- two officers, Quartermaster (QM), Radioman (Sparky), Torpedoman, Gunner's Mate, three Motor Machinist Mates (MoMM), a non-rated seaman, and an ~~ordinary~~ navy-rated Cook who, we believed, had never cooked a meal before coming aboard! Ages ranged from 18 to about 30. The old man of the crew was Manning, QM, and thus referred to as "Pappy".

While in the Navy Yard, most of us lived on board. The days were a combination of getting to know every possible detail of the boat, as well as the special equipment that each man was responsible for. Exercises in underway procedures, boat handling, communication, navigation, battle station duties, simulated torpedo firing, live target practice on surface and air targets -- all were conducted in restricted areas of Long Island Sound. Long range practice patrols were run up the Sound all the way to Melville.

Then the came the orders for Panama. We first ran from New York harbor to Norfolk, Virginia under our own power -- our longest sea run to date. In Norfolk, a large crane lifted the sixty ton boats and placed us on the deck of either a freighter or tanker bound for the Canal. While on the ship's deck, the boats were secured in such a way that they could float free in the event the ship was sunk by enemy torpedoes. We sailed in convoy to Panama, through the Canal, and unloaded on the Pacific side at the Balboa City Naval Base.

The purpose of the stop in Panama was to give us chance for more intensive training (in Navy terms, a "shakedown"). For about three weeks, we ran patrol, firing, and navigation exercises. Then came the word that four boats of the squadron were to be transfered to Squadron 2 and to join them in the Solomon Islands (Guadacanal) as soon as possible. The transfer included all boat personnel. However, the 109 skipper (Jack ??) worked some deal to stay in Panama. I never knew why. I never asked.

The 109 was one of the four transfer boats. Since Jack bugged out, another officer was assigned to the boat. My friend from V7 school, John Chester, came aboard. By Navy regulations, Navy serial numbers determined seniority -- mine was (is) 120763, John's was 120764. I became skipper, John the executive officer -- the fickle finger of fate was writing again. The 109 and the 110 were loaded at once. The 110 had Chas. Tilden as skipper and J. C. Duckworth (the Duck) as Exec.. You will hear more of John and the Duck.

Again we were loaded on a merchant freighter and headed out across the Pacific -- somewhere in the Navy stuff there is a chart of the Pacific Ocean on which I plotted our position from day to day. Each boat was equipped with celestial navigational gear even though we never expected to use it. However, I decided to take the opportunity to learn to navigate by the stars -- so I practiced and took star sights every evening from the bridge of the ship with the ship's Captain or Navigator as an instructor.

It was a long crossing with maximum speed about 8 knots (9 miles per hour). We were unloaded in the port of Noumea, New Caledonia. As far as the eye could see, the anchorage was filled with warships and supply vessels. Many of the warships showed the gaping scars of a recent battle further north. Suddenly the war was here -- not way over there! Since Guadacanal, our destination, was too far to run on our own, and since there was no crane in the Solomon's large enough to lift us off a ship, the solution was to hook us on a tow line behind a destroyer and pull us up and into the battle zone! For several days and nights we rode that tow line. It was a vomit voyage for all but the skipper -- I was just too busy, tensed up, excited, to bother with vomiting!

About the fourth or fifth day we were off the eastern end of Guadacanal and entering Sealark (?) Channel with the Guad. to port and Tulagi and Florida islands to starboard. As we entered the area our radio came alive. "This is Cactus Control -- the condition is RED, repeat, RED." Cactus Control was headquarters at Henderson Field on Guadacanal. We were to hear from them many times in the coming months. Welcome to the war!!!

Guadacanal and Squadron 2

With "condition RED" we cast off the tow line, started all engines, sent the crew to General Quarters (battle stations) with all guns manned and ready -- an appropriate introduction. We set a course for Tulagi harbor and the PT base on Tulagi island. Fortunately the raid over Henderson

was brief so we could then concentrate on the tricky entrance to the harbor and locate the base at Sasapi village.

Entering Tulagi harbor, we passed the entrance reef off the port side, then swung left with the small island of Tulagi to port and the much larger Florida island to starboard. At the west end of the harbor and on Tulagi island we spotted the Sasapi base -- a few quonset huts, a dry dock for boat repair, and little else. A short but quite deep river flowed into the harbor just across from Sasapi. Dense jungle foliage overhung both river shores, providing camouflage coverage for not only the off duty PTs, but also for the USS Jamestown, a converted yacht-tender that served as our source of both gas and daily rations. We had last seen the "Jimmy" in Melville; now here she was, buried under jungle foliage and camouflage nets, half way around the world.

We reported in to the Sasapi base. The squadron commander, Lt. Rollin Westholm ("Westy") welcomed us. It was late afternoon and we had just finished five days underway on that tow line with little sleep and less digestible food. Westy sent the two new boats and crews up the river to moor under the jungle coverage (for air raid protection), sent an evening meal up to them and suggested a good nights sleep. But not for everyone.

The newly arrived officers sat in on the daily pre-patrol briefing. As they did every night, half the PTs went out at dusk to patrol off the Japanese held shores of Guadacanal, while the other half took the night off. Then Westy came up with his idea of "on the job" training. The two new boat skippers, Tilden and myself, would ride as observers on two of the patrolling boats. And so we did. We left at dusk bound for the Doma Reef patrol area (about 20 miles distant). The skipper of the boat briefed me on the patrol procedures and then, probably to keep me awake, said we would come under fire from Jap guns as we neared the Guadacanal shore. As we left the harbor, I could still see the huge billboard sign erected at the entrance. The message was brief and to the point --Kill Japs, Kill Japs, Kill Japs -- signed, Admiral Bull Halsey. Who needed sleep with all that excitment? As we neared the Doma Reef area, out of the darkness came what looked like a "roman candle" red ball that dropped in the ocean far short of our boat. It was a shore battery opening up on us. But it was so far off and seemed so harmless that when the skipper suggested I bag some ZZs on the off watch, I not only did so but slept through the rest of the patrol!! A few nights later all hell broke loose!

The next day, Westy named the 109 the squadron "flag" boat with myself as skipper and Westy on board as squadron commander. John Chester (with a file number one number higher than mine) went aboard the 44 boat with Frank Freeland the skipper.

Now a few comments about the primary mission of the Guadacanal PTs. The Japanese invaded the Solomon Islands in the spring of 1942. That summer, U.S. counter-attacked, retaking Tulagi island and harbor as well as the airfield on Guad. (Henderson Field) and forcing the Japs into a decreasing area at the western end of the island. The Japanese still held the middle and upper Solomons. From their air and land bases they launched repeated air and sea attacks on U. S. positions, including frequent attempts to reinforce and supply their troops. Our Navy could not maintain a constant force to repel these frequent forays by fast and powerful Japanese destroyers, and so it became the mission of the torpedo boats to harass and derail the "Tokyo Express" as best we could.

We worked out tactics as we went along. All of our torpedo attacks were at night. The "Express" only ran on dark (moonless) nights in order to avoid our air attacks. That also meant we could use the darkness to get into firing position without being detected. All PT torpedo attacks followed the same pattern -- a slow, muffled approach, the torpedo launch from 500 to 1500 yards out, and a high speed retreat usually behind a smoke screen and under heavy fire from the destroyers.

I should say all attacks but one. One night in early December the Express ran in force. The 44 boat, with Freeland and John Chester aboard, found itself confronting two or more destroyers. For some reason, Frank chose a high speed attack, leaving behind the boat a tremendous phosphorescent wake that was like a searchlight pointing to the boat. He never had a chance. The first salvo from the destroyer hit the engine compartment and stopped the boat. While they tried to save the boat the second salvo hit the gas tanks. There were only two survivors, one of whom told us the tale. From the 44 we learned two lessons -- don't make a high speed night attack, and if you are hit, under fire, and dead in the water, get all hands off the boat before another salvo blows everyone to hell (the sea-going equivalent of bailing out of a plane).

Some nights we ran mercy missions. On the night of Nov. 30, the Navy sent four cruisers up to meet the Express (the PTs were held at base). The Jap destroyers caught our cruisers in a torpedo spread, sinking the Northampton and heavily damaging the others. About midnight we were called to get underway to search for survivors. Just off the Tulagi harbor entrance, the cruiser Minneapolis, who lost her bow to a torpedo, was burning and in danger of sinking. We (the 109) put a pilot aboard her so she could make the harbor. Then we went after the men of the Northampton. Over the next few hours, we put about 120 survivors on the 109. Upon returning to the Sasapi base, there was the Minneapolis hard aground next to our base where they ran her to prevent sinking. It was a bad night.

Sometime in December we moved to a new home. A native village at the mouth of the river was converted to living quarters for all hands (see my memorabilia for a picture of the new "grass hut" home). By now all of the boats were infested with cockroaches and rats -- picked up while moored in and under the jungle foliage. Calvertville (the village) was a fancy resort by comparison -- fresh air sleeping and unlimited fresh water showers from a nearby stream. But the Express still ran and on Guadacanal our troops were in daily bloody combat with the enemy.

Then came early January and more "dark of the moon" nights. On the night of Jan. 10/11 the Express was running again. It was our turn to go after them but the 109 was not operational that night (an engine problem) so we moved all hands to the 112 boat with Westy aboard as Ron commander. Our assigned patrol area was Tassafaronga beach, the expected landing area for the Express. As we headed for the "hot spot," our torpedoman (Dollar) came to the bridge and handed me what he said was a "lucky bean" given to him that day by some native. He asked me to hold on to it as we might need some special luck that night. How right he was!

Our three boats (112, the 43 with the Duck as Exec., and the 126 from Ron 6) were on station sometime after dark -- and it was very dark. Suddenly there they were -- three destroyers directly in front of us. Westy gave the command to close in and fire. I took the 112 to point blank range (perhaps too close for a torpedo needed 300 yards to arm itself) and fired all four torpedoes, as did the other two boats. Up to that point we were undetected -- but there was a flash from the tubes as we fired and the destroyers opened up on us. I pushed the engines to full speed and tried to run between two of the destroyers (the only possible escape route). Before we could get up to speed, a shell or shells hit the engine compartment at the waterline setting it afire and stopping all engines. From the lesson of the 44 boat, we abandoned ship at once, hoping to get in the water before the next salvo finished the boat and us.

As Craig came up and out of the engine room, he pulled the CO2 extinguisher system and the fire went out (almost). By some miracle, or stroke of "sea bean",luck the Japs never fired again. Everyone got off the boat safely with only one wounded man (Dollar took some shrapnel in the leg). As we were in the water, the Japs turned a searchlight on the boat and surrounding water, saw the boat was dead in the water and down at the stern (sinking), held their fire and left the scene.

Somewhere in the water there was the small cork raft we had thrown over, but where was it? When the searchlight came on we scattered, expecting more gunfire. I found myself alone in my life jacket, burdened by my helmet, poncho,

binoculars, pistol, and code books. Others were in the same situation. I knew we would be picked up by PT patrols at dawn, if not before, so I made myself comfortable and waited. Some of the crew had found the life raft and after some time I floated into them. Then we saw the 112, down at the stern but floating. As we tried to reboard, there was an explosion and the stern blew out -- so back to the water. While still dark, another PT found us and between then and early morning everyone of the crew was picked up. Luck was again with us that night. If the shells had struck less than ten feet further forward they would have hit the gas tanks and blown us all to kingdom come.

What about the other two boats? The 126 fired and managed an "end run" to safety while fire was directed at the 112 and 43. The 43 boat was also sunk. Shells hit the stern area, killing the stern gunners. The boat was dead in the water and they also bailed out and were picked up later. My V7 friend, the Duck, was among the survivors -- this time.

Did we hit anything? How could we miss at "point blank" range? I don't know the answers. I do know we got credit for one crippling hit on one destroyer. I do know that aiming torpedoes on a black night without any speed or firing angle track (such as a submarine has) is a very crude system. And I do know that many of our torpedoes were defective -- they either didn't run true or didn't explode when they hit (ask the submariners that used the Mark VIII torpedo from World War I inventories!).

During the week that followed, I reformed the crew. There was a "survivors leave" policy (official or unofficial?) that sent any survivor home upon request. Many took it. A few did not. Westy, the Duck, and I did not. Within another week we were back in action -- this time Duck was exec. on the 37 boat.

On the night of Feb. 1/2 the Japanese evacuated Guadacanal, using both destroyers and planes to cover the withdrawal. The PTs were the only opposition. Duck was the only PTer to lose two boats. He died on the second when destroyer gunfire blew the boat up with no survivors. We also lost the 111 to shellfire and the 123 to a bomb. Our patrol area was off Savo island, some distance from the main action. In the middle of a heavy squall, a shell exploded just off the bow of the 109. We turned to see a destroyer bearing down on us. Having no position for a torpedo shot, we made a fast turn, hit the smoke generator and again "got the hell out of there" under scattered fire.

That was the end of the PT action in Guadacanal waters. We didn't sink many ships but we messed up a lot of attempts at reinforcement and supply. In the process, Squadron 2 suffered the greatest losses of any squadron in the war. We must have been more aggressive or just unlucky. Maybe more skippers should have carried lucky beans!!

Special Missions and a New Skipper

Guadacanal duty was not all torpedoes, guns, and smoke. There were a number of special missions that I will always remember. The night actions meant limited visibility with patrol sections scattered over a wide area. Anything we could do to get a better track on the Express and so bring maximum boats to the attack was worth trying. The 109 was selected for two such experiments. The first idea was to see what we could see from the top of Savo, a volcanic island that sort of guarded the western approach to Guadacanal. One morning I went ashore on Savo with three or four others to hike to the top of the island where we set up an observation post, hoping to be able to visually spot the Express on the way in order to concentrate maximum PT strength via radio instructions. No luck but an interesting try.

The next idea was radar for the PTs. At that time radar was developing fast but not yet ready for us. So we took the antennae that hung from the wings of a radar equipped plane -- mounted them upright on the bow of the 109, and stationed the 109 near Savo on a night when the Express was running. It was a dark and squally night. The Express ran right past us undetected. Another interesting try and again no luck. However, my second squadron, Ron 36, had excellent radar on every boat.

Then came the Russell islands, fifty miles northwest of Guad. Before moving the boats up to the Russells, a marine scouting party went in to look for opposition. The 109 was assigned a pick up mission; leave Tulagi at dusk, run to the Russells, find (in the dark) a particular cove off a particular bay to rendezvous with the Marine scouts, and bring their C.O. back to Guadacanal for a report. It was a navigational challenge using dead reckoning and coastal piloting skills. Running entirely after dark from start to finish, we picked up and delivered the C.O. to Guad. on schedule. Hairy at times but very satisfying!

A final patrol on the 109 (and for awhile it looked like a finale for all of us) took place in the Russells. We were based there for a short time after Guadacanal was secure. I led a two boat patrol north of the islands one bright, moonlight night that was supposed to be a milk run. But here comes Cactus Control with a coded message that always meant action pending. As I decoded it, the first words were "two DDs sighted" then a position that placed them very close to us -- so close that I ran to the bridge see if I could spot them visually. On a moonlight night it was close to a suicide mission. Then it dawned on us. The coast watcher that sent the report had spotted our two boats in the moonlight -- we were the "two DDs!" And that was my last Solomon patrol!!!

* DD was a code symbol for destroyer

A few days later, the squadron (what was left of it by now) was pulled out of the Russells and sent back to the Sasapi base on Tulagi. Good News!! Once back on Tulagi, all squadron combat personnel headed for Auckland, New Zealand for ten days of R & R (rest and relaxation). We went down and back by ship so the total "time off" added up to about four weeks (Hoo Ha!). So what do you do in a strange city? You start by struting along Main St., eyeing the girls. Then you hit the bars, and what next? For me it was a break away from the group so I could wander around the city on my own.

As I wandered I discovered that the hunting season was on in New Zealand. When I indicated an interest in bird hunting (ducks and pheasants) to the proprietor of the hardware store, he told me to come back as soon as possible with some shotgun shells and he would do the rest -- did he ever! When I returned he handed me (a total stranger) reservations and travel instructions to reach and stay with a family in the back country -- then gave me his beautiful 12 ga. shotgun. Off I went and for the next week I enjoyed not only great hunting, but also a wonderful time with a New Zealand family and their friends (the hunting license is still in my memorabilia). Then it was back to Tulagi where there was the best news of all -- my relief officer was coming in and I was going home!

That relief officer turned out to be Lt.jg John F. Kennedy. Like the rest of us, Jack volunteered for PT duty, went through the Melville training center, was ordered to join Squadron 2 at Tulagi as a replacement officer, and so became the new skipper of the (my) 109. With his family influence, Jack could have pulled duty (been assigned) almost anywhere. The fact he chose torpedo boats says something for both the man and the duty. The relief (rotation) applied to the what was left of our original crew as well. Len Thom, a huge, blonde, viking-type linebacker from Ohio State, had been my executive officer on the 109, coming on board when I reformed the crew after our loss of the 112. He was the only man that stayed on with Jack.

JFK and the new crew of the 109 soon headed for the new advance base at Rendova, on New Georgia, further up the Solomon island chain and where the Tokyo Express still ran. One very dark night, not long after arriving in the new battle waters, the 109, while on an "anti-Express" patrol, was rammed and sunk by a charging Jap destroyer. Jack, Len, and all but four of the crew survived (Jack took over the 59 boat and continued war patrols until a back injury ended his PT duty). Before I took off for home and the 109 headed for Rendova, I got to know Jack a little and many of my mates knew him very well. He was a fine man -- a competent and courageous officer. Those that allege otherwise were either not there, or are from another political party, or both.

Homeward Bound and the Melville Honeymoon

It was appropriate that I should leave Guadacanal on a destroyer (one of ours) for I had arrived on a destroyer tow line, and had spent my time trying to sink destroyers (theirs!). The DD was rolling at anchor. I got seasick as I came aboard and stayed that way for the three days into Espiritu Santo. As a PT skipper I was always too busy to be sick -- as a passenger, it took ten minutes! While waiting for an eastbound ship to the states, I chanced to meet "Timer" Sutton, a Pillsbury Ave. neighbor of the Smith family and about to fly north into the Solomon battles in his B24 bomber. I told Timer I was heading home to marry his friend and neighbor, Gerry Smith. Timer told his mother. His mother told Ann (Mrs) Smith and the fat was in the fire for I had not yet got around to asking Geraldine. So I lucked out! Timer had bad luck. He died in the skies over Bouganville (upper Solomons) before I got home.

I did get home. And within three weeks (repeat, three) we were married in a full, formal church wedding, followed by a ten day official honeymoon in northern Minnesota and an unofficial honeymoon that lasted for eleven months! I was ordered back to Melville to await reassignment, which could be either shipping out very quickly as a replacement, or, drawing a new squadron. We took a chance on the latter and headed for Newport (Melville).

Life in Newport was a ball! Most of the officers of Ron 2 were single. Most of us that came back brought brides to Newport and with little to do other than wait for orders, it was Party Time, USN!!! Among the newlyweds were Ron and Betty White. It was Ron and his crew that fished us out of the water back in January and now, as of this writing, Ron and Betty are spending time in Green Valley -- small world!

Life in Melville was a piece of cake. As I left for the Melville base each morning Gerry would instruct me to "get some sleep today cuz we have another party tonight!". We did have some duties as instructors in patrolling and boat handling. We also took some serious training in the operation and use of the new radar being installed on every boat. In particular, we practiced blind torpedo firing from a radar track. I do not know of anyone that used the radar track in action, but I do know that radar became very valuable as an aid to navigation as well as spotting surface targets and enemy aircraft.

It was February before the orders came -- new construction, Squadron 36. That meant a few more months in New York while the Ron was outfitted and ready to ship out. So we trained back to Minneapolis for a leave -- then back to New York for the new boats and new shipmates. Here we go again!

Squadron 36 -- New Guinea, Philippines, Borneo

The honeymoon took on a somber tone. There would still be time for some fun and games, but we would be always looking over our shoulder for the bloody war was still out there and that's where we were headed. The outfitting proceeded as before. Deliveries of new boats were followed by new crews and new weapons. The officers of Ron 36 were a mixed bag of veterans (all (four from Guadacanal), transfers from other duty, and recent V7 grads (like us two years ago). Neither the squadron commander nor the executive officer had had prior PT or combat duty (command went to seniority, not time on the firing line). With only a few exceptions, the crews were very young (under 20) and new to the boats (but with specialty training in their ratings). My PT529 was manned entirely by recent trainees. It was my job to turn them into an effective battle crew. Bit by bit we qualified.

The new boats had some new weapons. Now came the new aerial torpedoes used by our torpedo bombers -- much faster, with a much larger war head. Better yet were the new launching racks that rolled the fish (torpedoes) over the side rather that shooting them out of a tube. No more revealing flashes to draw deadly enemy fire!! And we now had a 40mm gun mounted on the stern -- some major firepower. But best of all we had radar -- eyes that could see in the night and so greatly reduced the stress of night patrols, at least for those of us that learned the trade with only binoculars and a lot of luck. For all that the new the boats remained as vulnerable as ever -- a floating gas tank that depended on darkness, stealth, rapid smoke covered retirements, and large quantities of guts and luck.

With all this we sailed for Panama once more. This time we unloaded on the Atlantic side and ran our own boats through the Canal (with a pilot ahead) Once again we were based on the docks at Balboa City (Pacific side). After about three weeks of "shakedown" drills, it was back on another ship as deck cargo (just as before) and we set course for Manus island, one of Admiralty Island group in the Bismark Sea, just north of New Guinea. On our own power, we ran along the Guinea coast to the small atoll island of Mios Woendi, where we joined other PT squadrons -- all preparing for the invasion of the Philippines.

While on Woendi, we made several patrols of the western New Guinea coast. We made no enemy contact but did adjust ourselves to long patroling and night operations. By this time I was one of four senior skippers and thus a section leader of two or three boat patrols (the Ron 36 commander never did designate any specific "flag" boat) -- how nice to be boss!).

To be truthful, the most memorable Woendi episode was the "Clydesdale Patrol." The 529, with one other boat, was sent to Hollandia, New Guinea, about 250 miles down the coast (a ten hour run at 20 knots). There we conducted special radar tests with U. S. destroyers. While moored at the base we discovered we could draw beer rations for the entire squadron -- about 250 cases! Draw it we did -- then took off for Woendi with beer lashed topside and stuffed below decks! I made a deal with the crew. Each man could claim 5 cases for his own -- that came to 55 cases for us and the rest for the squadron. I thought it was very generous of us and it did keep the 529 well supplied for many, many months.

From beer to the battles. The Leyte invasion got underway. Our intrepid Ron commander sent the first six boats up with the invasion forces and held the rest (including the 529) back for a couple weeks. Every Ron 36 combat-experienced skipper was in the second group - and I was the only skipper qualified in radar track torpedo firing. I protested. The 529 belonged in the first group. We stayed in Woendi for two weeks and missed the Battle of Surigau Straits. I still wonder what we could have done with radar directed spread of 24 new, high speed torpedoes from six PTs vs. the random attack that produced nothing.

Our second group joined the first in Leyte Gulf. Our primary patrols took us through a narrow strait between Leyte and Samar islands, then south on the west coast of Leyte to Ormoc bay, the last port available to the Japs. Again, our mission was to stop or hamper anything coming in or out of Ormoc. Over the course of many patrols the 529 had only one contact. We fired two torpedoes at an enemy ammunition ship bound for Ormoc. We missed but I radioed the target's course and position to our destroyer screen stationed near Ormoc. They didn't miss.

Leyte was secured before long and it was time to move on. Next stop -- the landing at Lingayen Gulf on the west coast of Luzon, well north of Manila and Bataan. On the way to Lingayen with the invasion convoy, I had my first look at a Jap "kamikaze" plane. These were suicide pilots that volunteered by the hundreds to crash their bomb laden planes into our ships. This one plane, a twin engine bomber, appeared on the horizon, aimed straight for a large tanker in the convoy, hit it straight on as both plane and ship exploded. Truly a terrifying sight, but only one of many in the dance of death we call war.

Our Lingayen base was in the small harbor of Port Sual. From this base we ranged north and south along the west coast of Luzon, looking for "targets of opportunity" but finding very few. We ran very long patrols north around Cape Bojeador to the mouth of the Aparri river -- the very limit of our gas supply. Here the enemy was the sea.

Huge swells, built and propelled by strong winds, would roll in from across the South China sea -- making topside footing very dangerous, our radar reception very poor, and an effective attack all but impossible. Daytime running was possible though rough and hazardous. Night operation was an exercise in survival. On nights like these, my station was at the wheel and throttles, personally guiding the boat through, around, over, and occasionally under, the heavy seas. There were times when I secured the patrol, taking the two or three boats into the lee of an off shore island where we could lay to until daylight gave us safe passage. But there were times when we had to tough it out.

One of those times was our special mission to pick up a survivor of fall of Bataan, that had avoided capture and had been living with native Filipinos for two years. The 529 was sent on a solo run about one hundred miles down the Luzon coast, to a small bay just north of the Bataan area. We entered the bay on a very dark night and on time. A pre-arranged blinker signal from the 529 brought the proper blinker reply from shore, and soon a small raft came out with our passenger. So far so good, but not for long!

We headed north into increasing winds with several hours of running ahead of us. Before long, too late to turn back and with some hours of darkness before daylight, the seas built up to a very dangerous level for night operation. The waves I could see by the foaming tops I could ride over -- it was the ones I couldn't see (many if not most) that slammed us like a sledge hammer. Now and then some crewman would struggle up to the bridge to ask, "Will we make it?" Great question -- a real confidence builder! "No sweat -- piece of cake" was the standard reply, as I groped for the lucky sea bean always in my pocket! We did make it, thanks to a very well built, seaworthy boat and a very salty crew.

One added note on the Lingayen operation. The Japs not only came up with kamikaze planes, but also suicide boats -- about sixteen footers with an inboard engine and a load of explosive in the bow. The idea was to ram a ship and die. In Lingayen they did little of either but they did destroy or sink the boats before we got there. The 529 crew located one such boat underwater on a harbor reef. With some spare time between runs, the crew raised the boat, overhauled the engine and turned it into our private runabout -- the 529 gig!!

Lingayen was secure. It was time to go Jap hunting again, so off to Borneo we went, gig and all. But the Ron commander objected to our deck-loaded gig so the crew traded it for some special chow. Borneo was at least one thousand miles south so we took it in stages. First back to Leyte, then through the Mindanao Sea to Zamboango, then followed the Sulu Archipelago to the east coast of Borneo, and south to the small, oil rich off shore island of Tarakan.

I never did know why Tarakan had to be taken. The Japanese garrison wasn't going anywhere; the war was over in Europe; let the Japs die on the Tarakan vine. But no dice. Somewhere in the high halls of politics and diplomacy a decision was made by men that were insulated from combat -- the Dutch colonial rulers must have their oil, now. Shades of the Persian Gulf!

The Australians went in on land and air. Squadron 36 was the U. S. Navy. The landing was unopposed. Our part was to lay close offshore the night before the landing, illuminating the beach with mortar flares and strafing with 40mm, 20mm, and 50 cal. guns -- the 4th of July with no one shooting back! The Japs pulled back into the heavy jungle where they faced starvation. The Aussies, many of whom were transfers from North Africa, had no business being alive after all they had been through. These were some tough hombres with no interest in prisoners. The Japs must have gotten the word for they never surrendered, just died.

Our mission was to patrol the around the island and along the Borneo coasts to prevent any escape. Escape to where? There was nothing but salt water swamp land for hundreds of miles! But patrol we did. The 529 was scheduled for the first run around the island. It was delayed until a minesweeper could clear the channel -- but there were Jap gunners along the jungle shore that sunk the sweeper with heavy losses. The sea bean was still working!

With no surface targets at sea, our noncombatant commander came up with the bright idea of running up the rivers -- at times to deliver guns to the villages of the Dyaks (the legendary "head hunters" of Borneo) and let them hunt Jap heads. Most rivers runs, however, were just to "see what was up there." Nothing was up there, but a single starving Jap with one machine gun or mortar could have wiped us out in those narrow channels with thick jungle cover. We boat skippers asked "why." ComRon said it would look good on the squadron record. So we patrolled, but very cautiously for the end was near and we wanted to live.

So did eleven Japs. It was a night patrol just off Tarakan. Another very dark night. We picked up a radar target quite near at hand. We had many radar contacts in these waters but all of them so far turned out to be floating debris..But you never knew so we came to battle stations and closed in. I told the other boat to lay off while we put our searchlight on the target. It was a very small raft, some empty oil drums lashed together, carrying eleven Japs desperately trying to go somewhere. I had three choices -- leave them alone to starve and/or drown; kill them all (an acceptable choice under the rules of our Tarakan war; or take them aboard as prisoners. I opted for capture but may not have done them any favor for the Aussies ran the

stockade (if they had one).

At any rate, with all guns bearing on them, we took them aboard one by one, stripped them and laid them spread-eagled on the bow. As we turned them over to the Aussie control that morning, I got a picture of them (see my scrapbook). These were the enemies I had hunted, chased, or been chased by, for all these months and years and finally we came face to face. They didn't look very mean -- just some naked, worn out men that wanted to go home. But for my clothing, we had much in common.

It was almost time to go home. There were still patrols to run, and special missions like the long run to the Celebes to search for a downed plane, and daily missions to the "Clydesdale Maru" (a Jap barge we converted to a beer and crap table lounge for afternoon relaxation).Then the big bomb dropped on Hiroshima, followed by the official surrender on Aug. 15th. We made it! Time to go home! But just one minute. ComRon had no orders to secure patrols so he sent us out the next day (under protest for we were sure the local Japs had no way of knowing it was over). So we cleared the harbor, turned and ran north a short way, cut the engines, broke out the beer, and returned to the harbor base on schedule -- the last patrol!!

Within days, a big PBM (flying boat) landed in the harbor, bearing some relief personnel, including the next and last skipper of the 529. I signed off the log, flew back to Manus island off New Guinea, caught a merchant ship that took me to Panama, transfered to a commercial airliner, landed in Chicago where my lonesome bride waited for me, and we got on with the business of raising a family.

Reflections

There are nights even now when I have a hard time believing my own PT duty. The Navy took a twenty two year old land lubber that looked eighteen, put him in command of a "fast ship" and sent him in "harm's way" night after night after night. He, and the men that rode with him, served with both skill and courage, as did the thousands of others that took the hundreds of boats into battle in almost every theater of the war.

There may never be another true torpedo boat; advanced military technology has probably rendered PTs obsolete. But there will be other small, fast craft for special missions of derring-do. And there will be more young men that will accept the duty and challenge of harm's way, for there will be work to do and lessons to be learned.

One lesson I learned was the rule of command; while rank has its privileges (RHIP), it also has responsibilities that come before privileges (RHIR). Then there is the rule of "standard operating procedure" (SOP); master it and follow it faithfully every hour of the day and night. Finally, there is the luck factor -- a Navy file number, a shell that hits just short of the gas tanks, another that misses at point blank range, a sudden squall that covers a retreat, the prisoner that doesn't have a grenade in hand as he climbs aboard the boat. We always need a measure of luck; a pocket full of sea beans never hurts!

And a final thought about war for that's what it was all about. Any way you look at war, any war, it does seem to me it represents the "great failure of man." Let me recommend you read and ponder the attached commentary and definitions of war. They speak for themselves and they speak for me.

Bryant L. Larson, Lieutenant Commander, USNR (Ret)
Commander, PT109, PT529
Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons 5 - 2 - 36

WAR -- Commentary and definitions (from Christian Science Monitor 2/5/91

Can anything be more ridiculous than that a man should have the right to kill me because he lives on the other side of the water, and because his ruler has a quarrel with mine, though I have none with him? (Pascal)

War hath no fury like a non-combatant (Montague)

There never was a time when some way could not be found to prevent the drawing of the sword.(U. S. Grant)

What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and democracy?(Gandhi)

War is only a cowardly escape from the problems of peace. (Thomas Mann)

All wars are civil wars. All killing is fratricidal (Adlai Stevenson)

There are no warlike peoples -- just warlike leaders. (Ralph Bunche)

Definitions

That mad game the world so loves to play (Jon. Swift)

That attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood (Lincoln)

A blood stained stagger to victory (Lloyd George)

A crime --ask the infantry and ask the dead. (Hemingway)

The great failure of man (Cordell Hull)

Something that begins ten years before the first shot is fired.(K.K. Casey)

Transformation of a man into a thing. (Simone Weil)

The unfolding of miscalculations (Barbara Tuchman)

What do I think of the war? The above erudite, eminent individuals have said it much better than I. As an old warrior and present day historian I agree with all of them.

"ROLL CALL OF THE SQUADRONS"

Tonight the "Roll Call" will take us on a voyage of memories -- memories of torpedo boat "derring do" that spanned war zones from the island battlegrounds of the Pacific to the coastal waters of Western Europe. Back ~~on~~ the days of sailing ships and action at close quarters, John Paul Jones called for a "fast ship for tonight we go in harms way." In WWII our fast boats did just that -- night after night after dark and squally nights.

Our voyage will take us to the principal theaters of PT action and the Squadrons that had their primary actions in that theater...and when we say "Squadron" we include both Boat personnel and attached Base ranks and ratings. As your Squadron is called, along with the others that did battle in that theater, please stand so we can recognize all of you as "Warriors" of that theater.

The voyage starts by calling attention to the support structure that played an indispensable role in preparing and maintaining the Squadrons. That support ranged from basic training of all hands...to providing everything from food and shelter, to repairs and ammunition, to fuel and medical services. With such support, the boats could reach out further, stay on station longer, strike harder and be ready to return to action sooner. Without such support, few boats would have left safe harbor.

This support started with the training facilities and personnel at Melville, RI. where classroom instruction was mixed with "hands on" patrol with the boats of Squadron 4. So our first "call" is to ask all of you that were attached at any time, in any way, to any of the Training Centers or Boats ... to please stand and be recognized as the "Warriors of Narragansett Bay!!"

From training to action the support continued. Special PT Base Force Units and special PT Tender vessels (literally, floating Bases) were set up or moored as close as possible to the combat zones in order to maximize hours on station and minimize "down time." This placed many of them squarely "in harms way" as enemy air raids and the loss of the PT Tender Niagara can attest. We now call all of you that were attached to any PT Base Force Unit -- or any of the PT Tenders to please stand and be recognized as the "Warriors that kept the warriors underway!!"

So wind 'em up, cast off all lines and we're underway...bound for Pearl Harbor and Midway Island where Squadron 1 got it's baptism of fire...and continue westward to the Philippines where the heroic actions of Cmdr. Bulkeley's Squadron 3 (the Expendables) gave the PTs the performance record and the publicity that would result in 45 Squadrons by the war's end! If you were attached to Squadron 1 or Bulkeley's Squadron 3...in any way, at any time, please stand and be recognized as the "Warriors that first met the enemy."

And now to the Lower Solomons and to Guadacanal...where the hallowed waters of "Iron Bottom Bay" are the final resting places of so many ships and warriors from both sides...including six PTs...some with all hands. This was "torpedo alley"... the destination of the "Toyko Express" and where our PT boats were often the only Navy standing in the way. Operating out of the Tulagi base were Squadrons 2 -3 - 6. If you were attached to these Squadrons in any way at this time or later...please stand and be recognized as the ""Warriors of Guadacanal!!"

Meanwhile, along the New Guinea coast, the enemy had to rely on armed and armored barges for supply and reinforcements. Operating from Bases such as Tufi, Morobe and Dregor Harbor, and facing heavy barge traffic almost every night, the PTS developed their own "gunboat" procedure -- broadside fire at close quarters. It was a tough way to earn your night's wages! Doing so night after night were the following Squadrons - 7-8-12-18-21-25- - Please stand - all of you - and be recognized as the "Warriors of New Guinea!"

From mid '43 well into '44 the objective was to clear the enemy out of the Upper Solomons in order to neutralize the major enemy base at Raboul. With Bases at Rendova, Vella Lavella, Bouginville, Treasury and Green Islands, the Squadrons had a potpurri of targets and missions. And it was on a black night, in the black waters of Blacket Strait that the legend of PT 109 was born -- the tale of a courageous skipper and crew that just ran out of luck. Luck, you see and remember, was a necessary presence on all PT combat patrols if you were to survive! Seeing action in these waters were ten Squadrons -- 5-9-10 - 11-19-20-23-28-32-37...Please stand for recognition as the "Warriors of the Solomons!"

Our magic ship of memories takes us now to the Med. Sea. From bases in Algeria, Sicily, Corsica, as well as along the Italian and French coasts, our PTs joined with the British Coastal Forces to engage "E" boats, large and small supply vessels, including the large and well armed "F" lighters -- and to run a wide range of special missions. Unlike the Pacific, their enemy was often underwater -- mines that no lookout or radar could detect; that accounted for most of their losses. Sharing combat and camaraderie with the British were Squadrons 15 - 22 - 29. All of you - including Base Force and Tender personnel please stand for recognition as the "Warriors of the Med. Sea!"

It is June of '44 and D-Day is underway! From June to Oct.'44 four Squadrons saw action in the waters of the English Channel -- they were Rons 30 - 34- 35 - and the three boats that made up a reborn Ron 2(2) under Cmdr John Bulkeley. Once again mines were a constant danger along with special coastal missions behind enemy lines. All of you - including Base Force and Tender personnel - please stand for recognition - as the "Warriors of the English Channel!"

And back to the Philippines in the autumn of '44 where Gen. McA fulfilled his promise to "return." In early '42 the PTs of Ron 3 took the General and family to temporary "safety" in the southern Philippines. Now another PT brought the General to a symbolic landing on the beaches of Leyte. Nine PT Rons saw action in this "I shall return" campaign -- in the Philippines and in waters as far north as Okinawa and south to the Halmaheras and Borneo. Combat targets ranged from the DDs and BBs at Mindoro and Surigayu Straits, to the barge "shoot-outs" off Moratai, to the guts and glory of the Medal of Honor rescue at Wasile Bay. Seeing primary action in these waters were the following Rons (listen close for your Ron number!!) -- 13 - 16 - 17 - 24 - 27 - 31 - 33 - 36 - 38 --- All of you, including Base Force and Tender personnel, please stand and be recognized as the "Warriors that Returned (with McA!)"

The voyage and the war nears an end. Getting ready for action as the war ended were eight Rons - one awaiting call in Hawaii, two just arrived in Samar (Phil) - three awaiting orders for the Pacific - and two that were built but not commissioned. If you were a part of any of the following Rons, 26-39-40-41-42-43-44-45 -- Please stand and be recognized as the "Warriors in Waiting!"

So the war ended and so does our "Roll Call" However, via personal contacts, the "All Hands" newspaper and reunions such as we now enjoy, the memories live on -- of our"fast ships that did indeed go in "harm's way!"