

PT 658: Reliving Serving on PT 156 on the 80th Anniversary of D-Day

By Greg Sessler

While the connection of our visit and ride on PT 658 and D-Day was not on my mind when I suggested a trip to Portland with my dad, the coincidence provided a powerful backdrop to our experience.

We had visited PT 658 years ago not long after my dad, Stan Sessler, moved from his long-time home in upstate New York to be close to me in the Seattle area due to a series of medical issues. That was a 94th birthday visit with family which resulted in an invitation to join the PT 658 a few months later to greet naval ships coming in for the Rose Festival. Those visits were the highlights of the year for him (and me) that we have cherished since then.



Stan with son and grandson during visit in March 2018



Stan at the helm of PT 658 during 2018 Rose Festival

Fast forward to his 100th birthday celebration that brought him to San Diego via the Amtrak Coast Starlight and a memorable visit with family and friends to the USS Midway, an experience on the opposite spectrum of naval vessels from my dad's service on a PT Boat. After that trip, I mentioned to my dad my gratitude to all the volunteers for the tremendous effort that goes into preserving these ships not only for him but for family, friends and the public to recognize the significance of the history of WW II. From that discussion came the idea of heading back to visit PT 658 again. Dad replied with an enthusiastic yes indicating "we didn't make it back last year, did we?" I reminded him that it was 6 years since we made those visits. "Impossible...it cannot have been 6 years." Like a lot of activities in our lives, I told him that the pandemic had put a lot of things on hold but no better reason to see if we can get the trip on our calendar. After a quick response from Bob Day, it was on our calendar.

I was recently asked by a guest during a ride on my boat on Puget Sound, how did I get interested in boating. I replied answered with a little chronology of my dad. It included his participation in the Sea Scouts as a teenager and a restoration of a dry docked, unseaworthy boat on the Passaic River in Northern NJ with 5 other friends. After a lot of hard work and the mentoring of the boat yard owner they successfully made it seaworthy and made numerous trips around New York harbor and Long Island Sound.



Sea Scout Stan (on the left) with friends on their restored 42 foot boat on Long Island Sound

Sounds a bit like the PT Boaters restoring the 658, except it was a pre-Navy experience. When the US entered WW II, each of them enlisted as soon as they could, in my dad's case being underage at 17. With his boating experience, getting assigned as a quartermaster to PT Boat 156 in the South Pacific was inevitable.



Quartermaster, Second Class Stan after enlisting in US Navy

After V-J Day, a return to the States and redeployment to a newly built destroyer, the USS Fechteler, during its outfitting and shakedown cruises was his next naval experience.

But falling in love and getting married to my mother interrupted that plan.



Stan on his wedding day 1946

After leaving the Navy and getting his college degree in animal husbandry, a long career in farming followed. Boating took a back seat to flying as my dad got his private pilot's license and purchased a 2 seat Forney Aircoupe. But one of my favorite family vacations was on a Chris Craft cabin cruiser lent to us by a friend of my dad for a week on Lake Champlain. And before his move to the Seattle area, a 17 foot Four Winns was in his driveway ready for launch on a local lake on a sunny day.

During the weeks before our visit, each time I saw my dad there were anticipatory conversations: "Who is going to be on the boat, will any of the PT Boaters be there I saw last time?" "Where will the boat go this time?" "What will the weather be like, do I need to bring a coat?" Lots of unanswerable questions which I answered the best I could. Picking him up at his assisted living facility, he was ready to go. That hadn't happened since our trip to San Diego! The drive down I-5 was smooth, and it was apparent the weather was going to be perfect. We arrived early, waiting for the gate to be opened and my dad watched with anticipation as others began to show up. After parking, one lady asked if we were the honored guests for the day. I said not me but maybe this fellow beside me. My dad intently watched as the PT 658 slowly came to the dock after the morning's tour, saying hi to everyone as they disembarked and had pizza brought in by Bob. The crew was extraordinary bringing the boat into its boathouse to facilitate my dad getting on the boat. He took a front row seat and shouted the "Wind Them Up" signal for the crew to start the 3 massive Packard engines. My dad is hard of hearing but being next to the open engine hatch the sound of the engines brought a smile to his face. The ride was fantastic, and my dad was amazed as many of the fellow passengers stopped by to say a few words to him and get their picture taken.





Stan on PT 658 – 80th anniversary of D-Day

On the ride home, he was still excited, but the adrenaline was wearing off and I could tell it was a very emotional day for him. He was very, very tired but tried hard not to fall asleep as he recounted the fun he had that day. I'm sure he will want to come back next year!