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Oregon is home of world's only working PT boat



By Finn J.D. John

The Porpoise was one ugly boat in 1992 when the guys from Portland first laid eyes on it. It was a massive, weatherbeaten old hulk, 78 feet long and 20 feet wide, wallowing by the dock on Treasure Island in the Alameda estuary.

Some time earlier, a storm had sunk it in the bay; luckily, it had only been in a few feet of water, and easily refloated, but now it lay low in the water, its bilges heavily laden with silt and gravel and water that had seeped in where the hull had been patched. The electrical system was ruined, the engines were frozen, and after 35 years in the sun and rain, it looked awful.

To the Portlanders, though, the Porpoise was not ugly. It could never be ugly. To them, it looked like their youth. It looked like the powerful, reliable, blinding-fast boats they'd gone to war on, fifty years before, when they were young and brave and in U.S. Navy uniforms.

The Porpoise was an old PT boat. Specifically, it was the PT-658 – the only World War II-era PT boat still floating. There were four or five others scattered around the country, in museums and up on blocks here and there, but the vast majority of the hundreds of PT boats built for World War II ended up dragged up on beaches and burned at the end of the war. PT boats were only really useful for a navy at war. Their wooden hulls required too much maintenance, and their three massive V12 engines burned far too much gasoline (the equivalent of 0.1 miles per gallon at full throttle) for peacetime use.

Built late in the war, PT-658 had never gone into battle, which is why it was available in 1958 for Earl C. Brown of Oakland to buy as surplus. One imagines him having a thundering good time roaring around San Francisco Bay on his very own PT boat for a few years, burning gasoline by the ton; but eventually the big gunboat ended up parked at the dock, and there it sat for 30 years, looking increasingly weatherbeaten and unloved.

When Earl died, his son Orlando inherited the old warrior, and started looking for someone to give it to – someone who would restore it rather than just scrapping it out. And he soon found that someone – or, rather, those someones: a group of 18 former PT boat crewmembers in the Portland area.

The gift

What followed was a massive coming-together of Oregon people and businesses pitching in to save the historic hulk. Orlando Brown happily handed over the keys to a new nonprofit organization: "Save the PT

Boat Inc.” In a complicated and lengthy process involving the donated services of Sause Bros. Ocean Towing of Coos Bay, Foss Towing Co. of Seattle, the Washington and Oregon National Guards, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and others, the old warhorse was hauled up the West Coast to Portland. There, cradled on a barge moored in Swan Island Lagoon, it became the focus of a ten-year-long restoration effort.

Dozens of volunteers spent thousands of hours bringing the PT-658 back from the near-dead. There was plenty to do. The hull was badly rotted, and many parts of it had to be entirely replaced. There were three massive, ancient Packard engines – each one displacing 2,490 cubic inches, or five times bigger than the largest Cadillac V-8 automobile engine – that had to be rebuilt. And there was an entire very-complex electrical system that had to be rebuilt – twice, as it turned out, after an electrical fire in 2003. In their quest, the PT gang had a big advantage: A parts boat. By an odd coincidence, the sister boat to the 658, PT-659, was already in Oregon, in a cradle at Camp Withycombe in Clackamas County. PT-659 was in terrible shape, but there were pieces of it that could be used to make 658 whole.

Despite hopes to make 659 a museum boat based in Vancouver, the resources to do that never materialized, and in 2008 it was taken apart. Pieces of it were used to restore several PT boats, including one in Louisiana that actually sank two German ships during the war.

By then, though, PT-658 was actually in the water again – running under its own power. It made its first trip in September 2004.

Restored to its wartime glory



It was a spectacular resurrection. The old hulk formerly known as the Porpoise had, in the space of 10 years, gone from a bow sticking up out of San Francisco Bay, to a poised, fierce-looking warship, bristling with deadly weapons: three autocannons, four heavy machine guns, four torpedoes, two depth-charge cans and one big anti-aircraft cannon. The weapons were, of course, all demilitarized and non-functional – but they were there, and they looked ready for action. For the first time since World War II, the PT-658 looked like the fearsome fighter it was built to be. And for the first time since at least the late 1950s, a fully-functional U.S. Navy PT boat was under way on American waters.

Since that time, PT-658 has become a regular participant in events like the Rose Festival in Portland. In 2011 its paint scheme was restored to the original camouflage pattern, and it’s now arguably the most striking-looking of the Navy ships that ply the lower Willamette during festivals. In September 2012, it was officially added to the National Register of Historic Places.

The future

Today, Save the PT Boat Inc. is raising funds to get a combination boathouse/heritage center built on the waterfront in downtown Portland for the PT-658. Currently, the boat lives in a lovely custom-built

boathouse on Swan Island, but there's no public access, so interested members of the public usually have to wait for the boat to be brought out on "dates" at places such as the fire station dock at the east end of Hawthorne Bridge. A permanent downtown home would change that, and make it possible for school groups and tourists to come and see it.

More information about the project – including hundreds of photographs – are at www.savetheptboatinc.com. Anyone interested in volunteering or donating can learn more about that on the Web site, or by calling 503-286-3083.

(Sources: www.savetheptboatinc.com; www.hnsa.org; Fowler, Chuck. *Patrol and Rescue Boats on Puget Sound*. Charleston: Arcadia, 2011; Stewart, Bill. "PT sailors' dreams afloat once more," *Portland Oregonian*, 08 Jun 2004; National Register of Historic Places registration form, "Motor Torpedo Boat PT-658," 04 Sep 2012)

Finn J.D. John teaches New Media at Oregon State University and is the author of "Wicked Portland," a book about the dark side of Oregon's metropolis in the 1890s. He produces a daily podcast at ofor.us/p. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

Image above: www.savetheptboatinc.com. This photo shows PT-658's darkest hour, after a storm broke it loose from its moorings and dashed it onto a nearby jetty and it sank in about seven feet of water. Luckily this happened at high tide, so hasty repairs were soon made and it was soon refloated and docked. Had it sunk in deep enough water to disappear, it would most likely still be there on the bottom of the bay.

www.savetheptboatinc.com. PT-658 in 2007, after its restoration but before its authentic paint job, making 37 knots (42 mph) on the Willamette River. At this speed, the boat is burning about 200 gallons of aviation gasoline per hour, which comes to about one-fifth of a mile per gallon.

McKenzie River Reflections