

From farm to forest to PT boat

He was a traveling man, but his roots were in the trees, and later, at age 85, he skippered again

By AMY MARTINEZ STARKE
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Bob Hostetter was a Kansas farm boy who grew up near neither mountain nor ocean, yet fate destined him for both.

While a forestry student in Colorado, Bob learned to ski, expecting to be called during World War II for service with the 10th

Mountain Division. But he ended up with a commission in the Navy, as a PT boat officer.

Patrol torpedo boats were involved in some of the war's riskiest combat. Bob was on a PT boat in the Pacific late in the war, and he did not see the action he would have as a mountain troop in Europe.

In fact, Bob's life adventures in forestry were arguably more interesting than his wartime experiences. In his life, which included 31 years with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, he went to all 50 states, and "lived in 72 places in 21 states long enough to get a mailing address."

He traveled, as he put it, most of the way "around the world from east to west, from Vienna to Medan, North Sumatra, and 82 percent of the way from north to south, from Fort Yukon to Invercargill, New Zealand."

Relying on his diaries at 77, he wrote a 425-page autobiography filled with his precise memories, a dry laconic wit,

and almost total recall.

But his autobiography doesn't include a project dear to him in the later years of his life, which ended April 22, 2007, at 87 — helping restore a PT boat.

Bob grew up poor; his father was a missionary on the Potawatomi Indian reservation in Oklahoma. He went to high school in Holton, Kan. A friend was heading off to Colorado State to study forestry, so Bob did too, hitchhiking to college with one suitcase.

A classmate named May Stiles taught Bob to ski. If war hadn't intervened, they might have married.

Bob went on to get a master's degree in forestry from Duke University. But fate gave him a commission as a Navy ensign, reporting June 20, 1944, for relatively quiet

service on PT 348, patrolling along the coast of one of Indonesia's Maluku Islands.

He said the closest he came to any action was hearing a report of a Japanese soldier bathing in a stream along the beach. He photographed an officer trading his pants to a Filipino for a Japanese pistol, and sold the picture to *Life* magazine, which published it, and he received a check for \$5.

He became assistant captain of the yard at the Maritime Ship Repair Base in the Philippines. The forester gained an intimate knowledge of his wooden PT boat.



Bob, shown in 1932, was the middle of three brothers who grew up in Oklahoma and Kansas.



In 1940, while a forestry student, he was a fire lookout in Rocky Mountain National Park.



During World War II, he helmed PT 348 in the Philippines. He also served on PT 350 and PT 596.

Robert Dale Hostetter

Born: Dec. 27, 1919, Olpe, Kan.

Died: April 22, 2007

Beaverton

Survivors:

Wife, May;

daughters,

Valerie

Holander

and Brenda

Lichtenberger; son, Glen;

stepson, Richard Johnson;

stepdaughters, Linda Johnson

and Barbara Bohne; brother,

Horner "Clyde"; eight

grandchildren; and two great-

grandchildren

Service: Has been head, Bethel

Congregational United Church

of Christ, Beaverton

Remembrances: World

Forestry Center, Nature

Conservancy, or Save the PT

Boat Inc.



In June 2005, Bob Hostetter (shown with Chuck Kellogg and other PT boat veterans) took the helm of PT 658, a World War II motor torpedo boat he helped restore, as it cruised up the Willamette River during the Rose Festival. "One more trip, that's what this project is about," Bob said. "This has been a real thrill for me."

After the war, he helped de-commission the boats — which included burning them to the water line, as they were too expensive to bring back. Later, he wanted to remember this when he was seeking parts to help rebuild PT Boat 658.

In July 1946, Bob was released from duty. He had been corresponding with Jennie Mae Welch of Cheyenne, Wyo., through a write-a-soldier program. They married Dec. 28, 1946, and had three children.

From 1953 to 1985, Bob worked for the BLM in Salem, Medford and Portland, and briefly Washington, D.C. One of his proudest achievements was helping keep the Wildwood Recreation Area near Westmore

for public recreational use. When Bob and his family moved to Beaverton's Wilson Park in 1963, he had a dream to drive a PT boat down the Willamette.

Jennie died of cancer at age 53 in 1977. Bob and his Colorado State sweetheart, May Stiles, then reunited — both now widowed — and married in 1978. They bought a house together in Beaverton.

Bob and May climbed mountains and traveled. Bob watched birds and collected round rocks (he had 600). Rock art was seasonally displayed on the front porch.

He carved wood. He moved plants around in the yard. He grew different varieties of

tomatoes, for careful comparison.

The son of a missionary, he regularly attended church on Sundays, although he later revealed himself to be agnostic.

He also devoted time to a park in his neighborhood: Hyland Forest Park. Maintaining the park became his hobby.

He cleared and maintained trails, picked up trash, pruned the trees.

Despite several bouts of cancer, Bob still helped at "his" park in spring, summer and fall. From fallen branches, Bob made catch child in the neighborhood a walking stick.

Bob hadn't forgotten his fantasy of skippering a PT boat again.

PT Boat 658's 13-year restoration effort was under way in Portland when Bob, then retired, enlisted in the cause. Photos of the PT boat's restoration, many taken by Bob Hostetter, can be seen at www.savetheptboatinc.com.

The former PT boat executive officer got the honor of taking the helm during the maiden voyage of the rebuilt craft.

On June 6, 2005, Bob, then 85, accompanied by 15 or so former PT boat sailors, skippered the boat up the river.

"Yep, I'm a little out of practice," observed Bob. "I haven't driven one in 60 years."