

# *The Northwest Experience*

## Remembering the WWII History of Higgins Motor Torpedo Boat PT 658

by *Jim Farrell*

Growing up when this writer did in the Pacific Northwest, I never was far away from our local involvement in the two world wars. In 1917, my grandfather was stationed with the Spruce Production Division at Twin, Washington on the Straits of Juan de Fuca. (Over 30,000 troops were sent into the forests to log spruce that fed the vast kiln-dried mill at Vancouver). Two of my uncles served in World War II, one was a gunner in a Sherman tank who was killed during the Battle of the Bulge, while the other was a tail gunner in a B-17. During "The Bulge," he was given a rifle then put on the frontline because the bad weather kept the Army Air Corps from flying. He was trapped for three days behind German lines.

My early childhood memories are of the Navy and Coast Guard ships that had patrolled the coast and were laid up prior to decommissioning and scrapping in the 1950's. Many of the gun emplacements along the Washington and Oregon coasts can still be visited, and periodically unspent artillery ordnance is found on the beaches.

(This winter, anti-aircraft shells were found on North Beach in Grays Harbor County Washington. These 20mm rounds are believed to be from the 1940s, which makes their stability unknown. They have the resemblance of large rifle ammunition. Many of them were encased in a black rock or sludge. The Grays Harbor County Sheriff's office is warning the public

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*PT 658 snug in her boathouse on Swan Island. photo by Jim Farrell*

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“Don’t touch, don’t move, don’t transport” any similar device if found. If you see one of these rounds, leave it in place, mark its location and call Grays Harbor County Dispatch at 360-533-8765.)

As with all history, if we forget it, we’re doomed to repeat it. Throughout the region, our war defense history is on display for future generation to learn what it took to defeat authoritarian, nationalistic, hate-filled regimes. Portland is lucky as they have a very special boat on the Willamette River completely restored by eleven extremely dedicated World War II veterans.

Beginning in 1992, they located a half sunken PT Boat (Patrol Torpedo) in the mud of San Francisco Bay and contacted the estate of the former owner and barged her to Portland with the hope to fully restore the boat to her former glory. No, not Kennedy’s PT 109 that those of this writer’s age grew up hearing about, but the last remaining WW II PT boat in the world that is fully operational, including her re-armament, the PT 658.

It took 12 years of restoration until September 2004 before PT 658 was seaworthy and ready to be launched. With clear skies in 70-degree weather, the boat cleared the dock at the Swan Island. Bob Hostetter, a former PT executive officer, stood at the helm as she headed out into the Willamette River. He later turned over the helm to former PT-231 Skipper, Ed Jepsen. Also, on the bridge was former PT-150 Skipper, Russ Hamacheck.

most heavily armed Navy vessels during World War II. Torpedos, machine guns and depth charges gave PT boats enough fire power to attack enemy ships, barges and shore installations in the South Pacific, Alaska and European war combat theaters. The commitment the original eleven veterans (only Frank Lesage still alive) made has been continued by a very dedicated group of volunteers who are keeping the dream of the of the original vets alive.

This group, Save The PT Boat Inc. ([www.savetheptboatinc.com](http://www.savetheptboatinc.com)), have also built a boathouse for the PT-658. The boathouse provides weather protection for PT 658 and contains the PT 658 Heritage Museum and is moored inside Vigor’s Portland shipyard and has been PT 658’s home base seven years. The relationship between PT 658’s crew and Vigor’s workers has grown in respect for each other: for the expertise Vigor’s workers have and willingness to help the PT 658 organization; and for the determination of the PT 658 crew to preserve, maintain and keep a piece of WWII history alive and operational.

(Vigor just recently bought the Christensen Yacht Plant in Vancouver for building aluminum landing craft for the US Army, then were themselves bought out last year by Global investment firm, The Carlyle Group (NASDAQ: CG) and private equity firm Stellex Capital Management).

Their efforts have been aided by many in Portland’s boating community, like marine surveyor, Allison Mazon, ([www.almsurvey.com](http://www.almsurvey.com))



The crew of the PT 658 working in the museum.

The ramp to the boathouse and museum is ADA approved. PT-658 (Save The PT Boat, Inc.) is a 501 (c), (3) Non-Profit Organization that is supported with donations and grants. She is available for viewing by appointment on Mondays and Thursdays, contact ([www.savetheptboatinc.com](http://www.savetheptboatinc.com)).

A concern for the PT 658 group is the change in ownership of Vigor. They’re unsure of their month to month rental of the berth from the new owners. Maybe it’s now time for Portland’s boating community to help find a permanent home not only for PT 658 but for other historical vessels like the WW II Landing Craft LCI-713. What better tourist attraction could Portland add than at OMSI, where you’d be able to visit not only the Barbel-class submarine USS Blueback, but the Higgins ’78 PT Boat 658 and the Landing Craft LCI-713, all at the same location?

in WWII and the only PBY certified to take off and land on water? That may be possible sometime between June 30 and July 8 as the

two meet on the Willamette as they did throughout the world during WWII.

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For approximately 45 minutes, the boat patrolled the river with her three V-12 high octane gasoline Packards roaring as they did in 1945. One can only imagine what the original eleven veterans felt when they heard the three V-12's fire up and feel the PT-658 cut through the water as it did over 60 years ago during their Navy service aboard Naval ships and PT boats in World War II.

"I wanted to hear the sound of those Packard engines turn over ... one more time and feel the rumble of the three Packard' under my feet, it felt like nothing else in the world," said 95 year-old Frank Lesage, the only surviving member of the original group that worked to restore PT 658. Frank served on a PT boat in the Mediterranean as a gunner's mate on the twin 50's battling the Nazis.

PT boats were the smallest and

who never charged for her services and according to the group, has been an invaluable asset with her knowledge of boat construction and mechanical systems. As someone who has used Allison myself for both buying and selling of sailboats, believe me, she knows her business inside and out and their assessment of Allison is right on.


Many other companies and unions have also pitched in like A-deck Dental, Caffall Marine Services, Sheffield Marine Propeller, the late Chuck Kellogg, Iron Workers Local 29 and many others like the current group I met who were all working on the boathouse and improving the museum, and come from all different walks of life.

PT-658 is now available for chartered rides so old and young alike can experience what the smallest fighting vessel sounded and felt like during World War II.




Higgins 78-foot torpedo boats of Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 13 (MTBRon 13) moored in Attu, Alaska, Jul 9-43. Note PT-75 and PT-78 nested outboard of their squadron-mate and PBY Catalina patrol plane taking off.

What would you, dear reader pay to have maybe a ride on the PT 658 to feel the rumble of the Packards start up and accelerate to 40 knots? How about adding the thrill of taking off and landing on the water in the Canadian (Canso) Catalina PBY9767 ([www.facebook.com/PBY9767/](http://www.facebook.com/PBY9767/)) that sank the German U-Boat 342 SW of Iceland



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