

When Island-Hopping Wasn't A Day At The Beach

BY ERIC CARLSON

Walking the deck of PT 728, supported on boat jacks at Southport Marina, brought back a stream of memories for Bob Rohde of Holden Beach. Fifty years ago he was on a similar boat, doing battle with the Japanese off the coast of New Guinea.

Every night, the enemy would try to transport food and ammunition to troops dug in along a long chain of occupied islands extending northwest toward the Philippines. Every night, the U.S. Navy's fast moving patrol-torpedo (PT) boats would try to keep those re-supply missions from happening.

It was a mission they called "barge-busting," after the shallow-draft cargo vessels the Japanese used to slip through coral reefs and sneak along the shorelines under cover of darkness.

The PT boats would idle along the coast, watching for telltale "blips" on their radar screens. With most of the islands still under enemy control, anything moving past the beach was assumed to be hostile.

On a good night, a pair of PTs could remain just beyond the range of shore guns and cripple a barge with cannon and machine gun fire. Then the speedy American boats would swoop in close, zoom pass the enemy craft at more than 40 miles per hour and toss a depth charge over the side to finish it off.

It was 1944, when Rohde was an eager, adventurous 17-year-old who joined the Navy and was seeing the world through the sights of two 50-caliber machine guns.

"On most nights, nothing happened," Rohde remembered. "Other nights, all hell would break loose."

Like the time Rohde's boat and another PT were quietly burbling along the coast when a sniper began firing from shore. The other boat's skipper wasn't wearing his helmet and was fatally wounded by a gunshot to the head.

Hearing the commotion, Rohde said they were moving closer to see what happened when another bullet tore through the other boat's hull and destroyed the primary fuel valve. It soon lost all power and went dead in the water, just as the artillery emplacements opened up from the shore.

The helmsman of Rohde's boat gave its three V-12 aircraft engines full power and began a high-speed circle around the stricken craft. As they passed between their comrades' boat and the shore batteries, the crew opened smoke canisters to create a thick fog along the beach.

Under this veil of cover, Rohde said they were able to evacuate the stranded sailors. But not without casualties.

"A couple of men got shot up pretty bad," he said. "But you had to take it in stride. If a guy got shot, the guy got shot. You still had to go back and make breakfast the next morning."

That was Rohde's job as cook aboard the PT 366. He volunteered for the bottom rung after deciding that he'd spent enough time hauling provisions, fuel and ammunition to the boats as a shore-duty sailor. He was later assigned to the PT 105, a former squadron mate of the famous PT 109 from which a young Lt. John F. Kennedy was credited with saving 10 men after being rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer.

While taking a tour of the PT 728 last week, Rohde pointed out his old battle station at one of the gun turrets. Knocking on the protective "armor" brought a dull wooden "thump" instead of the heavy clang of steel.

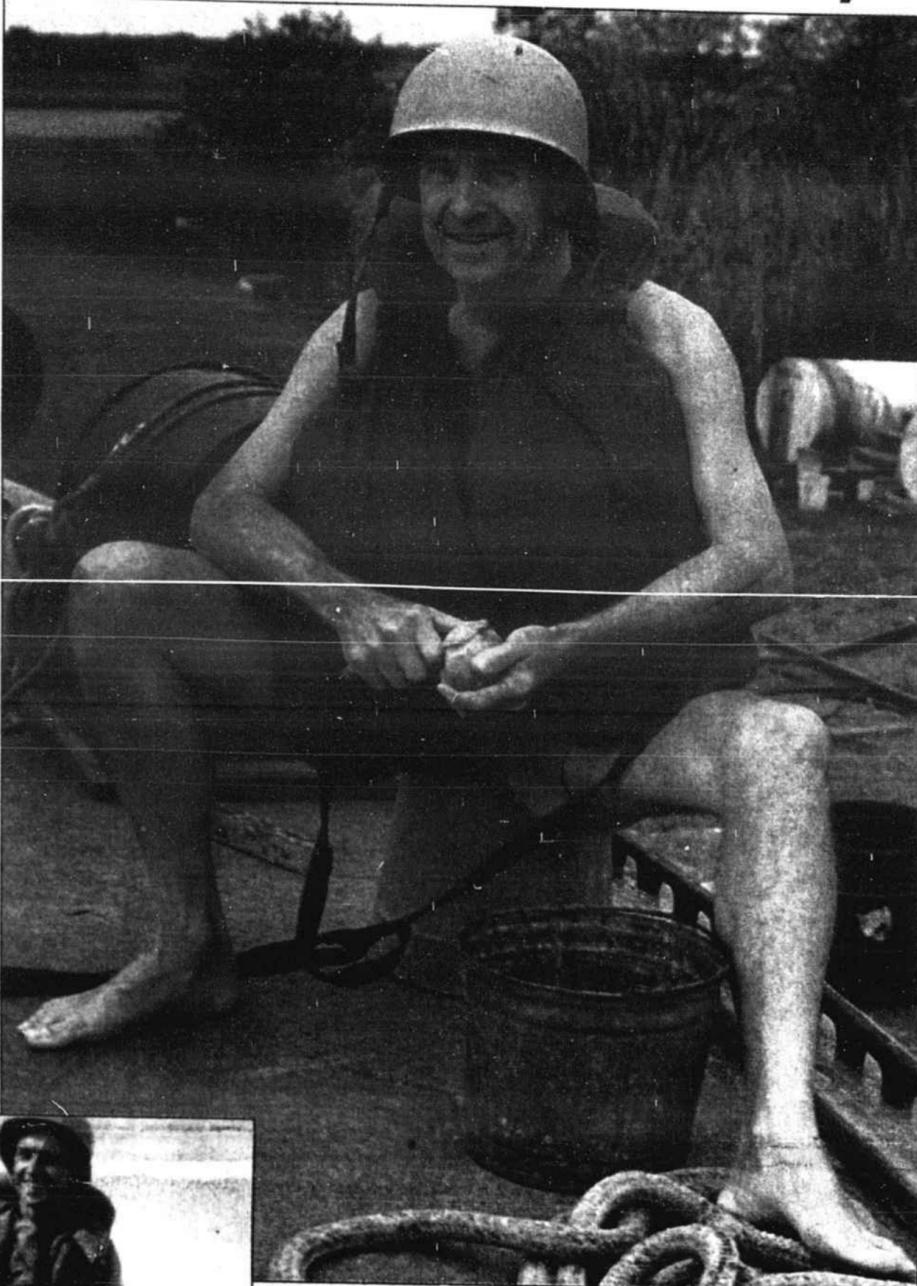
Other than the streamlined hull, there wasn't much left of the original 78-foot Higgins design. Even the torpedo tubes were wooden and painted black to look like the real thing.

Which isn't surprising, since the PT 728 was built for export and was converted to private use after seeing no action during the war. Its last "tour of duty" was in a movie about the South Pacific exploits of (who else?) John F. Kennedy. The boat's new owner brought it to Southport from his home in Key West, Florida. He plans to completely refurbish the PT 728 for use as a dinner boat in the Keys.

Still, there is enough of the craft left intact to spark Rohde's imagination and send the 68-year-old striding confidently around its familiar hull like the teenager that served on PT 105.

Disappearing below decks, Rohde showed a visitor the cramped engine room in which a trio of 1,200-horsepower Packard engines used to be mounted. Moving forward through a bulkhead, he pointed out a the cramped space where four bunks once hung, surrounded by three fuel tanks holding 2,500 gallons of 100-octane gasoline.

"Someone once figured that when you add up all the ammunition and the fuel on board, 80 percent of a PT boat's weight was explosive," Rohde said.



FIFTY YEARS after he was photographed peeling potatoes on a PT boat in the South Pacific, Bob Rohde re-creates the scene on the deck of a similar craft undergoing repairs at Southport Marina.



In all, Rohde spent about two years on PT boats helping to implement Gen. Douglas MacArthur's strategy of "island-hopping" through the South Pacific and re-capturing strategic territory held by the Japanese. Beginning in Milne Bay at the southeastern tip of New Guinea, Rohde's squadron "hopped" for 2,000 miles through exotic sounding outposts like Lae, Wewak, Aitape, Biak, Morotai, Mindanao and finally Leyte in the Philippines.

"It was an exciting time to be young," he said. The concept of small, fast patrol boats was originally scoffed at by officials who thought of naval warfare in terms of battleships, aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers. But the longer the PT boats remained in service, the more uses were found for them.

Besides barge-busting, Rohde remembers transporting native spies to Japanese-controlled islands, where they would be dropped offshore in rafts and retrieved a few nights later. The PTs often provided anti-aircraft support during major invasions. And their speed and armament made them extremely useful as rescue vessels.

Rohde's boat was once sent to rescue a downed pilot who parachuted into the middle of a harbor fortified



UNDER WAY off the coast of New Guinea, Rohde snapped this picture of a fellow crew member at his duty station aboard a fast-moving PT boat.

with 5-inch guns. The shells they fired were capable of sinking a large ship. Luckily, the artillery was mounted for long range use and could not be aimed downward. That allowed the high-speed PT boat to maneuver into the bay and pluck the pilot out of the water.

Such accounts tumbled out one after another as Rohde continued his tour of PT 728. Like the night his boat was nearly rammed by passing destroyer moving at nearly 50 knots. Or the time an Australian bomber mistook the PT 105 for an enemy boat and strafed the deck with machine gun fire.

"We had just seen a training film that showed how 50-caliber bullets slow down to almost nothing after going through about 3 feet of water," Rohde remembered. "So everybody who could jumped overboard."

"We still lost a couple guys," he said. "We had to stuff pillows into the holes to keep from sinking. But we made it back."

After the war, Rohde returned to his home in Babylon, N.Y. He went to work for the state highway department as a laborer and worked his way up to the engineering department in a career that spanned 33 years.

His wife Florence had a college friend from Wilmington who worked for the railroad. He told the Rohdes about Holden Beach. The couple moved here and built their own retirement home in 1982.

Since then, he said "at least a dozen" friends and relatives have also moved to the area. Their daughter Michelle is married to chief resident Superior Court Judge William C. Gore Jr. Their son Bob Jr. is an active member of the Tri-Beach Fire Department. Rohde's nephew Raymond DiNardi operates a foreign car service center in Shallotte.

As for Bob Rohde, he keeps himself busy with projects around the house, although he can sometimes be coaxed into showing visitors the old photos of his PT boat years. Most of the time he tries to accomplish exactly what he always planned to do after retiring. "Nothing," he said with a grin.



REMINISCING about his years on a World War II PT boat, Bob Rohde examines the hull of PT 728, which last saw duty in a movie about the young Lt. John F. Kennedy's exploits aboard PT 109.

The Capacity For Giving Thanks

BY BILL FAVER

Aristotle is credited with observing in the fourth century B.C. that "the nature of man is not what he was born as, but what he was born for." Others have written at length in attempts to say humans are more than the biological animals they share with all creation.

Some have called this nature the "spiritual man" or the "cultural man" as opposed to the "natural man" or the "biological man." The real difference seems to be "man makes himself," as one writer ably puts it.

Humans, unlike other animals, have the capacity for reasoning and vision which makes it possible for them to shape their own destinies. They can learn from the past, like most animals may do, but no other animal can analyze that past and incorporate those experiences into a vision of what might have been or what can be.

Humans can choose to modify animal instincts and urges to pursue other goals. Many have sacrificed their biological existence for nonmaterial values, like family and friends and country.

Humans can choose to help others in need or distress

to a much greater degree than do other animals. Their awareness of social conditions and individual circumstances can prompt them to respond out of caring for their fellow human beings.

Humans also have the capacity for giving thanks. They can acknowledge their dependence upon others and upon their environment and express their gratitude. They can choose to "protect the nest" by consciously seeking to work for better living space to improve the quality of life on this small planet we call home.

Adlai Stevenson's classic quotation on spaceship Earth reminds us all of the importance of realizing the interdependencies: "We all travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent on its vulnerable supplies of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace, preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and I will say the love we give our fragile craft."

Perhaps we can take time during this Thanksgiving season to add to our lists of people and things and values and ideas for which we are thankful. We can give thanks for the ability to understand the complexities and interdependencies of "Spaceship Earth" and the ability to help shape its future. And, we can give thanks for the "capacity for giving thanks" which sets us apart from other creatures.



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PHOTO BY BILL FAVER

HUMANS HAVE the "capacity for giving thanks" which sets us apart from other creatures.