

The Great Ships; PT Boats

Summary: An in-depth description of the once famous PT, or Patrol Torpedo Boat, ranging from the invention of the PT boat, to the weaponry equipped, to war stories, and to their ultimate demise.

Key words: Boats/devil boats, World War II, John Thornicroft, U.S. Navy, Pacific Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, John Bulkeley, Douglas MacArthur, Robert Whitehead, Captain Luigi Rizzo, Elco Company/boat, Higgins Company/boat, Andrew Higgins, George Selman, Packard engines, Congressional Medal of Honor, President Roosevelt, U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander Chester, Nemich, Ed Dubois, Germany, Japan, New Orleans, Hal Nugent, John F. Kennedy, Navy and Marine Lifesaving Medal, John Wayne.

The Great Ships; PT Boats

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Roger Mudd:

Hello, I'm Roger Mudd. Welcome to the History Channel. The 1933 graduating class at the Naval Academy numbered 431, and near the bottom was one John Bulkeley who was denied a commission for more than a year because of his poor performance, but nine years later in 1942, he was being honored as a national hero. John Bulkeley was the man who steered his PT boat through Japanese forces to rescue General Douglas MacArthur. Our program looks at that rescue and other adventures involving the legendary PT boats of World War II. The ships were considered too small to even merit a name. The PT stands for Patrol Torpedo. None the less, boats like PT-109, PT-41 became household numbers. Our program includes interviews with some of the sailors who spent the war on PT boats around the world. Join us now as the History Channel presents "The Great Ships; PT Boats."

Speaker:

Fast, maneuverable, and versatile, the patrol torpedo boats of World War II could deliver an awesome punch. Affectionately dubbed "mosquito boats" by the crews, their deadly torpedoes, or "fish" as they called them, were a threat to the largest ships afloat. Inch for inch, pound for pound, the PT's were one of the hardest hitting warships of all times. Constructed of wood and able to make speeds of up to 40 knots, the PT's were standardized into models that ranged between 77 and 80 feet in

length and 20 feet wide, weighing 50 tons with a range of approximately 500 miles. They were manned with two officers and eight to ten men. They carried two twin 50 caliber machine gun mounts. Later a 20 millimeter cannon was placed on the stern of the 80-footers to increase its sting against aircraft. But the heart of a PT's armament was its torpedoes. Depending on the boats, the PT's carried between two and four torpedo tubes.

Like a nautical version of David and Goliath, the PT's were designed to take on and destroy the steel hulled warships that had controlled the oceans of the world for generations. But during World War II, one of the most important roles they played were as barge busters, slugging it out at close quarters with the heavily armed craft the Japanese used to reinforce their island garrisons. From the Pacific to the Mediterranean to the frigid waters of the Aleutian Islands, PT's performed hazardous missions wherever they served, yet perhaps the most famous PT boat stories of World War II had nothing to do with attacking the enemy. One of these events helped turn a dashing young PT commander into the President of the United States. Another saw Lieutenant John Bulkeley rescue a legendary American General from almost certain capture.

March 1942, less than four months after the crushing Japanese surprise attack on the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces were closing in on the tiny fortress island of Corregidor at the mouth of Manila Bay in the Philippines. General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the U.S. and Philippine resistance had become convinced that the situation was hopeless, so too had the top allied leadership. After long debate, they ordered MacArthur to evacuate the island. Knowing that the Japanese would be expecting him to escape by submarine, MacArthur chose instead to leave on a tiny PT boat. His handpicked commander was John D. "Buck" Bulkeley. MacArthur believed that the 77 foot long torpedo boats were the only vessels that had the speed, maneuverability, and stealth necessary to thread their way through the intense Japanese naval patrols. Everyone else put the chances of the PT's success at <unclear>.

The roots of this extraordinary mission reached further than one might expect, all the way to Great Britain. It was here that the story of the American PT boat began when

two radical technologies were joined together into a signal revolutionary weapons system. One was a powerful new anti-ship device developed by a British engineer, the torpedo.

Speaker:

This is the weapon that made the torpedo boat possible. In fact, the torpedo boat was developed specifically to deliver this weapon. I'm sitting on a Mark 9 two star torpedo, as used by the Royal Navy in World War II. It's antecedents go back at least to the American Civil War when the confederate Hunley submersible sank the USS Housatonic.

Speaker:

It was called a spar torpedo and was mounted at the end of a long piece of wood. The danger was obvious. This configuration exposed the attacker to the explosion. Thinking that he had found a way to correct this flaw, a retired Italian Army Officer approached a brilliant English engineer named Robert Whitehead with plans for a remotely controlled spar torpedo. Though not overly impressed with the design, Whitehead was intrigued by the concept and continued to develop it until he came up with a breakthrough in 1866 that is still used in modern torpedoes.

Speaker:

Now he developed a mechanism using a hydrostatic valve to keep the torpedo at depth. Until then there had been no means of controlling depth. He also developed a balance mechanism, very similar to what is on this torpedo here, to make the torpedo run consistently at depth. It has made it now a predictable weapon. At the front end, the sharp end, the war head, 800 pounds of explosives, detonated normally by a magnetic or contact pistol. The really devastating thing about an underwater explosion is what's called the tamping effect of the sea. In other words, the explosion couldn't shift the water away, so the maximum force went where it could, which was into the ship. Now behind the warhead, this is the balance chamber here. Behind here, depth setting. This is the engine room. In this case, four pistons, semi-diesel, water cooled, starting pistol, gyro setting, horizontal and vertical fins for steering and depth keeping. Beyond that, counter rotating props, that's to stop the

torpedo spinning as it goes through the water, and right at the end is the exhaust for the engine.

Speaker:

By 1869, Robert Whitehead had improved his early torpedo design to the point where the British, then the largest naval power on earth, took a serious interest. Their goal was to arm small, fast boats with the new weapon, instantly making them a danger to even the largest warships, but greater speed was a necessity. For this part of their new weapons system, the British turned to another gifted designer named John Thornicroft. In 1877 when Whitehead's torpedo was mounted on one of Thornicroft's designs, the 84 foot long, 18 knot, HMS Lightning, a powerful warship was realized, the torpedo boat. Though fast for their time, early torpedo boats like the Lightning were still too slow and fragile to be of much use in combat. Better speed and reliability were obtained with the introduction of gasoline powered internal combustion engines in 1904. Shortly thereafter, Thornicroft produced one of the world's first stepped planing hulls.

Speaker:

Well, the step planing hull was an enormous advance. It was a way of reducing the hull area in contact with the sea. Once you reached a certain speed, you got up on the step, as they said, so you were zooming along on half the hull surface or less, which meant you got more speed for the same motor power.

Speaker:

The gasoline engine and the stepped planing hull gave the fledgling strike craft significant new capabilities. By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the torpedo boat was ready for action. On June 10th, 1918, the Austria-Hungarian dreadnought battleships <unclear> were steaming off <unclear> Island in the Adriatic when two Italian motor torpedo boats under the command of Captain Luigi Rizzo dashed out to attack them. In contrast to the Lightning's 18 knot top speed, Rizzo's boats could do over 30 knots, and each carried two modern torpedoes. The first boat's salvo of two torpedoes missed, but Rizzo's torpedoes both hit home, sending the <unclear> to the bottom. A boat weighing only a few tons had sunk the pride of the Austrian fleet,

altering the naval balance of power in the Adriatic. The torpedo boat was clearly ready for combat action.

It is possible that Douglas MacArthur had never even heard of Luigi Rizzo or the <unclear> bombing, but when he was serving as military advisor for the new independent nation of the Philippines, PT boats were very much on his mind, protecting the islands from the large and potentially hostile Japanese Navy was a daunting challenge for the former Army Chief of Staff. In 1937, knowing that the U.S. Navy lacked the budget to build more capital ships to defend the Philippines, MacArthur lobbied instead for a force of PT boats to do the job. Shortly thereafter, President Roosevelt appropriated \$15 million for motor torpedo boat development.

Speaker:

That was the very first ticket that PT boats got, and that's what started them on the road to becoming part of the U.S. Navy.

Speaker:

Although there were other U.S. designs, the most famous American patrolled torpedo boat was developed by a company called Elco, but again, a British connection was crucial.

Speaker:

The Elco torpedo boat was actually, originally a British design, designed by a man called George Selman who worked for another <unclear> Scott- Paine, and together they designed what was called the PV-70, PV standing for Private Venture, 70 for 70 feet. Now our admiralty didn't like it. They preferred their own sponsored <unclear> design, but just before the war when the U.S. Navy was starting to get interested in torpedo boats, one of the main designers came to England and Europe and to see what was going. He saw this boat, liked it, he took it across to America, it was then called PT-9.

Speaker:

Once in the United States, the U.S. Navy decided to run a series of tests, pitting Elco's PT-9 against several other experimental boats. The tests were dubbed "The Plywood Derbies".

Speaker:

Elco was pretty much declared the winner, and that helped develop the whole PT program, and set it all up as almost one style of boats. Elco got the lion's share of the contracts. Higgins in New Orleans built their 78-footer, and Huckins, a very small company in Jacksonville, got to build 18 boats.

Speaker:

The three 12-cylinder Packard engines that powered the PT's were derived from marine racing designs, and generated an astonishing 1,350 horse power each. Fueled by highly volatile 100-octane aviation gasoline, they gave the boats the 40 knot speed they needed to survive in combat.

Speaker:

There was a separate level for each one of those engines to either run it in forward or reverse, and one of the interesting things about that, with one of these boats, you could actually make it run sideways by using two engines forward and one reverse or vice versa to make it go either left or right, actually go sideways.

Speaker:

The methods used to construct the Elco boats were every bit as remarkable as their maneuverability.

Speaker:

They would build the PT's upside down. Most people believe that PT's are made out of plywood, but they're double laminated mahogany planking.

Speaker:

The first layer was attached to plywood frames which were then sealed with Marine and Marine glue. Then a second layer of mahogany planking was applied.

Speaker:

It's a very strong construction. Not only that, but it's easy to repair. I mean, the carpenters, when you get a shell hole in it, the carpenter could take out the streaks and lay in planking and overlap them, and it was just as strong.

Speaker:

In planning his defense of the Philippines, General MacArthur believed that the fast and rugged PT's would be perfect for hit and run attacks against an enemy invasion force in the sheltered waters of the islands. But by the time of Pearl Harbor, only nine boats of his planned force of over 90 had become operational. That number had now dwindled even further. Nevertheless, Lieutenant Bulkeley ragged flotilla continued to aggressively harass the Japanese at every opportunity. When the call came to evacuate their commanding general, the few operational mosquito boats were made ready.

When John Bulkeley received the news that he had been chosen to lead the mission to take General MacArthur off Corregidor, his mosquito fleet in the Philippines was down to four boats with exhausted engines, little fuel, and only four torpedoes between them. Since the Japanese began their invasion of the islands in late December, 1941, Bulkeley's tiny force had pursued a relentlessly aggressive campaign against the overwhelming Japanese naval forces. But the non-stop operations and lack of supplies had taken their toll. The exhausted Packard engines that powered the boats were months beyond their recommended overhaul dates, cutting their 40 knot top speed nearly in half.

Speaker:

The stories went that PT's went 70. There was a little song, I'm not sure how the tune goes, but it's some PT's do 70, some do 69. If we get ours to run at all, we think we're doing fine. Depending on combat conditions, the engines were supposed to be overhauled every 600 hours. It didn't happen. The PT's truer speed right out of the shipyard was 40 knots with a battle load, 45 without, and under war conditions, sometimes 20. I heard a boat in the Mediterranean went out at 19 knots one night.

Speaker:

On paper, Bulkeley's job looked practically impossible. From Corregidor, he was charged with leading a formation of four worn out boats through nearly 600 miles of Japanese waters, delivering MacArthur to an airfield near <unclear> Point on the north shore of <unclear>. But Bulkeley's force had at least one crucial advantage over the Japanese. The PT's had been designed to have a low silhouette, making them extremely hard to detect, and in these days, before the perfection of radar, the task of the Japanese would be doubly difficult. Bulkeley's men had also become highly adept at night operations.

Speaker:

Most people envisioned the PT boats as roaring in for the kill, with the water splashing and screaming "fire one, and fire two, and they really didn't work that way. It was more of a stealth operation. PT's largely operated at night. Later on in the war, they tried a few daylight raids, but most the time, everything was done at night.

Speaker:

At dusk on Wednesday March 11th, 1942, Bulkeley's PT-41 pulled into the dock at Corregidor. PT's 32, 34, and 35 were waiting just beyond Corregidor's minefield. In the gathering twilight, MacArthur, his wife Jean, and their four year old son Arthur stepped aboard the 41. After saluting Corregidor and vowing to return, the General informed Bulkeley that he could cast off. Linking up with his other boats, Bulkeley set a secret course. Behind them the big guns on Corregidor thundered to mask the departure, but along the shores of a neighbor island, bonfires were burning. Japanese coast watchers had spotted the little flotilla and were trying to alert their forces in the area. To avoid being sighted again, Bulkeley turned his boats away from the islands into the rougher waters beyond. Now the high seas began to take their toll. The boats became separated and Bulkeley was forced to continue ahead on his own. All during this time, MacArthur lay on a mattress below deck, seasick, his wife rubbing his hands between her own bouts of illness. Yet despite the rough seas, the rugged PT still managed to push ahead. Sometime after dawn on Thursday, March 12th, PT-41 arrived at <unclear> Island, mid-way to their destination. Within a few hours, two other boats straggled in. At 2:30 p.m., the three boats stopped waiting for the missing PT-35. They would later learn that its engines had broken down. It's

passengers and crew later made their own way to Australia. Barely back at sea, a lookout on PT-41 spotted a Japanese cruiser. The question was, had it spotted them? In top form, a PT could easily outrun a cruiser, but in their current condition, their top speed was barely 20 knots. The cruiser's was 36. Bulkeley altered course and prayed that the white caps would mask them. Fortunately, they did. The stealthful design of the PT's had saved them from being spotted. Finally, with dawn breaking on the morning of Friday the 13th, the light on <unclear> Point was sighted.

Lieutenant John D. Bulkeley and his PT-41 had delivered their leader on time and on target after 35 sleepless hours, high seas, and 580 miles of enemy waters. The ruggedness, long range, and stealth of the PT boat had allowed it to complete the mission, which at that time, perhaps no other vessel could have accomplished.

MacArthur's rescue made John D. Bulkeley one of the most renowned American heroes of World War II and a living legend to everyone who served on a U.S. PT boat.

Speaker:

I had the privilege of Bulkeley actually being on my boat once. I was in Squadron 6 in New Guinea, and he came back to the states after he got MacArthur out of the Philippines and got a Congressional Medal of Honor from President Roosevelt. He ended up back at the training center in Melville, Rhode Island, and Bulkeley came back out again with Squadron 7. So we had been operating then about six or eight months, and he decided he'd like to see how we were doing, so he took a run out with us. But I tell you, every man in PT's has the utmost respect for this gentleman. He certainly was one fantastic man.

Speaker:

Bold, aggressive, willing to take chances that others would deem foolhardy, John Bulkeley was perhaps the prototypical PT man. These sailors represented a breed apart, an elite group of men who, because of their free-spirited attitude, were sometimes looked down upon by the brass and the regular big ship Navy. An extraordinary esprit de corps that developed between the small PT's crews was crucial to how the boats functioned. Bonding the men with their vessels and each other to a degree that was unusual, even in a service where love of one's ship was common place.

Speaker:

Guys loved them. I fell in love with the boats. When I first got on PT's, I thought there was nothing in the world that ever rode any slicker or better or faster or more exciting. You know, 20 years old, full of <unclear>. Even after I came back, 13 months in the war zone, you'd think a guy'd have enough by then, I used to go out on weekends when they took the training crews just to get a ride on the boat.

Speaker:

The result of this tremendous affection was the boat and crew were melded into a smoothly functioning unit. It was a process that began with training, and every U.S. PT man received that training at Melville, Rhode Island.

Speaker:

MacArthur sent Bulkeley back to the United States with one message, to build more PT boats and properly train the crews, and that's what started Melville. Melville became the big base where everything having to do with motor torpedo boat training took place. The skippers were trained there, all the enlisted men were trained at every different aspect of running a PT. They knew how to fire the guns. They knew how to work on the engines in an emergency. Everybody was cross trained so in case anybody was hurt on a very small crew of 10 to 12 men, that they could step in and help.

Speaker:

On a Naval vessel, generally you always had one particular job you did, but on a PT boat, there was the constant possibility in action that somebody would be killed, and that would wipe out that particular phase of it, so everybody had to have a certain amount of understanding of everybody else's job. That was one of the unique things about PT's.

Speaker:

The PT boats themselves were designed from the outset to be as versatile as their crews.

Speaker:

PT boats were going to be developed to be used in all theaters of war. One of the very first Higgins squadrons that came out of New Orleans was sent to the Aleutians, and that was very, very harsh conditions on the smaller boats. They were designed to fight capital ships, however they found that, particularly in the Mediterranean, that they would be used in conjunction with the British gun boats, and so they, in theory because they were fast and had tremendous range and speed, that they could be used in any theater without fear of the mission not succeeding.

Speaker:

PT's were sent into combat all over the world as soon as there were enough trained crews to man them. But the first place they saw significant action was in the Pacific in 1942, during a grueling campaign that would see more American ships sunk than in the entire war up to that time, Guadalcanal.

August 1942, sensing that the time was right to take the offensive against the Japanese, U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander, Chester Nimitz, ordered the invasion of an obscure island in the Solomon's called Guadalcanal. Rising to the challenge, the Japanese focused the total effort of their Army and Navy on re-taking the island, turning the campaign into one of the bloodiest and hardest fought in all of World War II. And among the first of the U.S. Naval vessels to be sent to the area was a force of PT boats.

Speaker:

When the PT's originally showed up at Guadalcanal, they were on their own, basically. They had no forward base. It was very difficult for them. They moved into shacks, almost. Every night they'd go out and do battle and come back in and then have to refurbish the boat or work on it and reload. They'd have to reload the torpedoes, which were very heavy. A PT boat had 2800 gallons of fuel, and would

burn most of it. Some of them would have to be towed back in after a night's foray, so with 55 gallon drums being only the source on a forward base, it would take PT's hours to refuel.

Speaker:

Despite the difficult circumstances, the PT boats and their crews continued to fight doggedly, helping to fill a gap that was critical to the survival of American forces on Guadalcanal.

Speaker:

When we first got over there, there was no other vessel that we could have brought in there to do what we had to do. You see, a PT boat only drew five and a half feet of water. You'd get in pretty close to shore with that. We've been in where you could count the leaves on a pound tree. Because of that unique phase of them, that they were fast, maneuverable, could get in close to shore, there was nothing else that could have taken their place at that particular time.

Speaker:

As the battle for Guadalcanal became increasingly desperate, the Japanese began sending fast convoys of destroyers and cruisers to bombard U.S. Marines on the island. These forces came to be called the Tokyo Express. It soon became the main job of the PT's to harass these convoys. Lying in wait among secluded inlets, they would dart out, fire their torpedoes, then speed away to safety. But time and time again, these missions were spoiled by persistent problems with the boat's torpedoes. It was a difficulty that hounded the PT's in every theater of the war.

Speaker:

The torpedoes were horrendous, they had a 62 percent failure rate. They were Mark 8's designed in World War I for use by destroyers. They were very slow and had a very small warhead on them that sometimes, even if it hit its target, wouldn't work.

Speaker:

So we frequently would jam the rudders upright, the air lines I guess you'd call them, so they'd run along the surface like a motor boat, but unfortunately, some of them hit

the target and didn't explode. Some of them would run wild porpoise and go down below and come up, but the worst ones were the ones that would run on the surface and run in circles, and we had a number of missions where we were actually driven off by our own torpedoes.

Speaker:

One night in the Mediterranean, Ed Dubois was leading an attack of a freighter, and he screamed to another skipper over the radio, "How many fish have you fired," and the skipper's reply was, "I haven't fired any, I'm too busy dodging yours."

Speaker:

The torpedoes weren't the only problem. The method of firing them was also complex and cumbersome. The early Elco PT's had torpedo tubes that had to be manually cranked out into firing position. The torpedoes were then fired by electrically igniting black powder charges in canisters at the rear of the tubes. The Higgins boats had fixed tubes that were fired by compressed air. These systems were difficult and dangerous to use in combat. In late February 1943, the solution to the problems of both the torpedoes and their tubes was found in the same informal way that guided so much of what happened in the American PT boat service.

Speaker:

The real change with torpedoes and PT boats came when two skippers were sitting around having cocktails in New York one evening, talking about what a lousy things these flash powder torpedo tubes were and how they would ignite and show the enemies where the boats were and the torpedoes would run any place they wanted to. These skippers decided if they could use the Mark 13 aerial torpedo and just roll it off the boat on some sort of rack system, much like a depth charge would be used, that they'd be in much better shape.

Speaker:

Within a few days, a simple roll-off rack system was jury rigged right at their base. After only three further days of testing, the system had proven so effective that it was decided all future PT's would be armed with the new torpedoes and racks. By the time this new system entered service, the tide had already turned in the war against

Japan, but the PT's still had an important role to play in the Pacific, a role that would radically alter their armament and the way they fought.

Speaker:

As the war changed against Japan, we went from a defensive posture to an offensive posture, and the Navy brass decided that we would do an island hopping campaign, which would include leaving large groups of Japanese on certain fortified islands, with the whole purpose being to starve them out eventually.

Speaker:

The only way they could be re-supplied was by small boats at night, which was landing barges. They had thousands of them.

Speaker:

When the Japanese realized that this was their only supply line, they started reinforcing these barges and would put huge steel plates down the sides. There'd be troops in there armed with automatic weapons and light armor piercing shells, and the PT's had to change and develop with the enemy. With the new lightweight torpedoes on board, they were able to put a 40 millimeter on the stern, move the 20 millimeter forward, take a 37 millimeter off of a crashed Air Cobra, put that on the bow, and were able to give one hell of a punch. This is where PT boat's role changed from a giant killer to a barge buster.

Speaker:

So our job was to go out at night, intercept them, and take them out, and it was all gun firing. We didn't use the torpedoes. I never saw a big ship that we could have fired at. If we had, we'd have went tickle foolish.

Speaker:

Some of the most intense Naval combat of World War II occurred when U.S. boats battled at close quarters with heavily armed Japanese barges.

Speaker:

We got in between two barges one night and got cross fired. So there were six barges loaded with guns, and we couldn't imagine what it was. We found out afterwards, it was a General and his whole staff were evacuating <unclear> base, and we just happened to catch them one night. We wiped out all six boats, so when we got all done at the end of my 15 months, we had taken credit

for 14 landed barges we had sunk. They'd be anywhere from 60 to 100 feet long, and one dive bomber that we shot down.

Speaker:

It was during this campaign that the PT's earned their nickname from the Japanese. They called them Devil Boats. By making the transition from a swift torpedo attacker to a rugged gun boat, PT's had once again proven their amazing versatility. Yet even as the Devil Boats were helping to strangle the Japanese lifelines in the Pacific, on the other side of the globe, they were fighting a different enemy with different tactics. The place was the Mediterranean, and the enemy was Nazi Germany.

Speaker:

When U. S. PT boats first arrived in the Mediterranean theater in April 1943, the war was already three years old. Since September 1939, Great Britain had been battling Germany and her axis ally, Italy, in an attempt to keep her vital Mediterranean shipping lanes open. The American mosquito boats gave them a potent new weapon to strengthen their arsenal at sea. But unlike the Pacific where Elco boats were the first PT's used in combat, in the early part of the war, the majority of boats in the Mediterranean were designed and built by a company in New Orleans called Higgins.

Speaker:

The Elco's were 80 foot, actually, the Higgins boats were 79 foot. There's a vast difference in the construction though. Andrew J. Higgins who made the Higgins boats down in New Orleans made a very rugged boat. I was in Higgins boats all through the war. I tell you, it wasn't a really easy boat to live on, but it was a rugged boat, it took a lot of punishment. One of the big features, difference in the Elco boat

was the Higgins had two big rudders and could turn very fast, but Elco had three small rudders and they made long switching turns. But we were very fortunate in the Mediterranean because we did the work that we were really designed for. We were doing primarily torpedo work, and our main targets were what we called F-liners which were big barges, very heavily armored. We discovered very quickly that they were gunned. They carried 88 millimeters and 40 millimeters aboard, so after the first few brushes where we had a lot of people wounded, they told us not to try to slug it out with F-liners, but we also ran into a lot of German E-boats which were the equivalent of PT's, except they were larger. They were 110 feet long, diesel powered, and unfortunately, just as fast or faster than we were.

Speaker:

Cruising in a three boat division, the PT's would hunt for enemy shipping. After locating a convoy, they would deploy to the left or right, depending on the direction the enemy vessels were sailing.

Speaker:

We were very fortunate that we had radar and the enemy didn't have it, so we could stay off until we got the course of speed of the convoy, and then kind of come in flat angle on the bow to drop our torpedoes. The lead boat would drop his torpedoes, usually one or two at a time, and then shear off, peel off, and the next boat would drop his two, and then the last boat, the third boat, which we were always very anxious to see who was in the third boat, because by the time he dropped his torpedoes, the first torpedoes were passing or hitting the convoy and the firing usually started, so the last guy was in trouble.

Speaker:

Not all PT boat combat in the Mediterranean was ship to ship. The mosquito boats also proved themselves in amphibious operations.

Speaker:

After we were over about a year, we participated in the invasion of <unclear>. There was probably more PT boats involved in that operation than any other time in the Mediterranean.

Speaker:

It was June of 1944, just after allied forces had entered Rome, and the goal of the operation was to deny the Germans use of the coastal waters south of <unclear>, but the extensive mine fields around the island meant that it was considered too risky to use deep draft vessels in the invasion. So the backbone of its naval forces were provided by 37 American PT boats. During the operation, they did everything from protecting the troop ships and guiding the landing boats to the right place to patrolling for marauding enemy ships.

Speaker:

I had a patrol line from the island of <unclear>, which was south of <unclear>, which was where the main invasion of forces were coming in, and I had orders to stop anything that came across that line, and when I got on this patrol line, there was a target coming right up the line, and when we got within 400 yards, I challenged them, and the ship came right back with the correct recognition signal, and then gave us a correct recognition signal again. So I ran up, took the boat and ran it up alongside of this first ship and had a megaphone, took off my helmet and my life jacket and put that megaphone up to my mouth and said, "What ship are you," and the answer I got was a little surprising. It was a very extreme guggle of words and then they opened up with a broadside, and that first broadside hit me in my back. I had the binoculars on my neck. A shell came in from the side, hit this and knocked it around my neck a little bit. It's a good thing I didn't have the girth I have now or I don't think I'd be here. So I immediately yelled fire, and fortunately our first few bursts were a lot better than their's because we just about cleaned the deck off and we could hear them screaming and crying on the other boat, on the German ship, and we could see in the tracer fire that it was two F-liners being led by an E-boat. So we ran off slowly, which was in the opposite direction that the Germans were traveling, and I dropped a couple of smoke pots over the side, and as soon as the other two ships got in a position where they can shoot, they chewed up the smoke pot and didn't hit us. So

we were lucky. I don't know, we had something like 600 holes in the boat, but we didn't have anybody hurt.

Speaker:

It was actions like this that proved just how rugged the wooden PT boats were, helping to turn the invasion of <unclear> into a quick allied victory. It also helped make Hal Nugent's Squadron #50 one of the most effective PT forces in the theater.

Speaker:

We and <unclear> 15 were in the Mediterranean for something like 19, 20 months. During that time, we sank 31,300 tons of enemy shipping, which worked out to an average of 3,100 tons per boat. We only weighed 50 tons ourselves, so we had a pretty good return.

Speaker:

The PT's central role in the invasion of <unclear> was perhaps the most effective use of PT's in the entire Mediterranean theater, but almost a year before in the Pacific, a young Lieutenant underwent an ordeal that remains one of the most famous and perhaps one of the most controversial PT boat actions in all of World War II. His name was John F. Kennedy.

August 1, 1943, the Solomon Islands. Lieutenant John F. Kennedy was commanding PT-109 on a mission with 14 other boats to intercept a Japanese convoy of destroyers and fast transports. Like many others, Kennedy had been inspired to join the PT forces by tales of Douglas MacArthur's dramatic escape from Corregidor in John Bulkeley's PT-41. At 2:00 AM on August 2, Kennedy's boat sat idling in Blakett Strait, waiting for the enemy, when suddenly it was rammed by a Japanese destroyer. Two of the 109's crewmen died instantly. Kennedy ordered the rest to abandon ship.

Speaker:

If he was in a dark night, and you could get these quick cloud skies that would just drop down right on the top of the water, you couldn't see the front of the boat, but he

did a marvelous job in getting his crew out of that, that any of them were able to survive it.

Speaker:

After floating all night on the front half of the wrecked 109, Kennedy decided to take his men ashore to a small atoll that was some four miles away. Kennedy led the way, the strap of a badly burned crewman's life jacket clenched tightly in his teeth. For four hours, Kennedy swam, hauling the man behind him. Once on the atoll, Kennedy took stock of the situation. The only way to get help, he decided, was to swim out into a nearby channel at night with a lantern to try to signal a passing PT boat. Over the following days and nights, Kennedy made several long solo swims in a vain attempt to flag down a rescue vessel. Finally on the seventh day after the crash, help arrived. Lieutenant Kennedy was hailed as a hero. Kennedy's father wanted a Congressional Medal of Honor for his son, but he never got it. However, Kennedy did receive the Navy and Marine Lifesaving Medal. Douglas MacArthur thought that Kennedy should have been court-martialed for negligence instead, for allowing his boat to be rammed by the much larger destroyer.

Speaker:

There's some speculation as to what should have been done as a skipper, but keep in mind, he was very young at the time, and he's sitting there making split second decisions. But one thing that happened, he had all three of his engines in neutral. Most people don't understand how PT boats work. You assume it's just like a regular boat, but it's a series of signals that they only send from the bridge down to the motor men who actually manually work the transmissions below deck, so there was a delay from the second he spotted the destroyer as he tried to turn and then was rammed because of the construction of the boats. But after this, it was determined that all boats should be kept in gear while in combat, so that they can race away at a moment's notice.

Speaker:

The tale of PT-109 and its high profile commander would be retold many times, becoming a key piece of the Kennedy image when he ran for the Presidency in 1960. But some took the episode with a grain of salt. One night, not long after the failed

invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. <Unclear> President Kennedy was in the White House with a friend when the PT-109 came up. Kennedy begged off the subject, stating flatly that the whole story was more screwed up than Cuba.

At dawn on March 2, 1945, over a year and a half after Kennedy's boat was sunk, General Douglas MacArthur stepped onto the deck of PT-373 in the Manila Harbor. By 10:00 AM, the 373 had ferried MacArthur to the dock at Corregidor. It had been three years and three months since MacArthur left the island aboard Bulkeley's PT-41. MacArthur had vowed to return, now he had. Six weeks later, all of Manila Bay was back in American hands, and during that final summer of the Pacific wars in waters where Bulkeley's minuscule Torpedo Squadron 3 had once been the sum of American naval power in the Philippines, 212 PT boats were now in action.

During World War II, the mosquito fleet served at Normandy on D-Day, in the Mediterranean, in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska, and had tormented the Japanese throughout the South Pacific. But when the war was over, by years end 1945, most of the Devil Boats had been decommissioned. Despite their outstanding service, the Navy brass saw no place for PT boats in the post war fleet.

Speaker:

By 1945, PT boats were already obsolete. With radar controlled fire, which was getting completely accurate, a PT could never get close enough to fire a torpedo. Also, they weren't built to be moth-balled. They were built out of wood, not metal, so there was no way that they could be moth-balled for future use.

Speaker:

From all over the Pacific, 118 PT's were hauled to a beach on Samar Island in the Philippines. Stripped of their equipment, they were doused with gasoline and set afire.

Speaker:

Some of the skippers, the last things they had to do was bring their boats over just to be burnt.

Speaker:

I'm just glad I never was involved with that, because I had a love affair with a PT boat, and I would have stood there crying like a baby had I ever seen those boats being burnt up or destroyed. They were a marvelous boat, and they did a marvelous job in the various places where they were used. We are very proud of them with their service.

Speaker:

Yet despite their tragic end, the vivid memory of the PT's remains undiminished in the brilliance of their design, in the daring of their missions, in the pure can-do ingenuity of their crews. These swift, powerful vessels have left one of the most exciting and enduring legacies in maritime history.

Roger Mudd:

Lieutenant John Bulkeley's rescue of General MacArthur made him into an instant legend. He got the Congressional Medal of Honor, a ticker tape parade in New York, and he inspired the movie, "They Were Expendable" with John Wayne. General MacArthur called John Bulkeley a "bold buckaroo", but two decades later, Fidel Castro described with him much different words. In 1964, Bulkeley was Commander of the Naval base at Guantanamo Bay and was continually feuding with the Cuban leader. Castro called Bulkeley "a gorilla of the worst species" and offered \$50,000 for this capture. John Bulkeley, of course, survived and went on to serve a total of 59 years in the Navy. He retired as a Vice-Admiral in 1993.

For the History Channel, I'm Roger Mudd. Thanks for watching.