

# Devil Boats



My reference points regarding PT boats have always been restricted to two sources: JFK's exploits described in his book, Profiles in Courage; and the TV sitcom McHales Navy. Needless to say, neither really explained much about this unique and highly specialized craft. While the stories I read or watched regarding PT 109 and PT 73 captured my interest, they did not shed a lot of light upon this particular type of warcraft.

I have been working on a documentary for a nautical family and one of the facts that came out during the interviews was that the patriarch of the clan fulfilled his WWII service by building PT boats for Vetnor Boatworks in New Jersey.

I was surprised to learn that the PT boats were made from plywood, not steel. They were fast, highly maneuverable, and relatively inexpensive to build. The PT stood for Patrol Torpedo Boats. They were nicknamed Devil Boats by the Japanese or, as a whole, the Mosquito Fleet because they were small, fast, and a continual nuisance to the Japanese Navy.

A little research shows that the PT boats came into existence because in 1938, the US Navy sponsored a design competition

for companies to devise a highly mobile attack boat. When the US entered into WWII, there were no less than 12 companies designing and building these attack boats for the US government. As time went on, the design became more standardized and two companies stood out among the rest: Elco, based in Bayonne NJ; and Higgins, based in New Orleans.

When I learned that the boats were wooden, I expected to discover a high casualty rate among them but instead found them to be surprisingly resilient. Of the 531 ships that were put into wartime service, only 69 (13%) were lost. And of the estimated 63,000 men who served on the PT boats, 331 (less than 1%) were killed in action. There are only a few of these boats that remain in existence today as most were destroyed at the end of the war due to the high maintenance that wooden boats require.

My client attributes his woodworking skills (which are considerable) to those days in the Vetrnor Boatworks. This is just one story among many that were revealed while interviewing family members for this documentary. We are honored that they have chosen us to tell their story.

*Michael Ondrasik and Home Video Studio Mount Dora specialize in the preservation of family memories through the digitizing of film, videotapes, audio recordings, photos, negatives and slides. For more information, call 352-735-8550 or visit our [website](#).*