Ray Tyler climbs onto his World War II-era PT-8 boat.

Restoring history

Ray Tyler is determined to get his WWII PT boat ship shape

BY BRUCE SCHULTZ
Acadiana bureau

BALDWIN — Until three years ago, Ray Tyler of Baldwin had never owned a boat. Not a pirogue, bateau or a bass boat.

"This is the first boat I've ever owned in my life," he said, standing in the shadow of a World War II-era PT boat that he's restoring. "I always wanted a big boat with a lot of speed."

Only a handful of World War II patrol torpedo boats have survived, but Tyler's vessel has a special distinction beyond longevity. It is the only aluminum PT boat built during World War II, according to several books on the subject.

The hulls of all other World War II-era PT boats were built of wood. The material was called plywood, but books on the boats show it was not sheets of plywood but layers of wooden planking laid diagonally along the hull.

Since he bought it from a Texas family, Tyler has been working on the boat,

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Ray Tyler stands on the deck of his World War II-era PT-8 boat, which sits in front of his home along the Charenton Canal.
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"Way, he had two blow-outs. Tyler contacted World War II veteran Marvin Perrett of Metairie for help and advice with the project. Perrett said the boat is a significant historical piece.

"It's the only one in the world like it," said Perrett, who piloted Higgins landing craft, manufactured in New Orleans, at the invasions of Normandy and Iwo Jima.

Perrett admits that, at first, he was skeptical of Tyler's claim to have a lead on a surviving PT boat.

"I'm saying to myself this guy is full of baloney," Perrett recalled. "I didn't believe him."

Perrett rode to Texas with Tyler to see the vessel.

"When we first drove up and saw this old boat, it looked more like a submarine," he remembers.

Two books on PT boats, "United States PT Boats of World War II," and "At Close Quarters," document the history of PT8 as an experimental boat built by the Navy in Philadelphia as an alternative to the wooden-hull prototypes.

"The PTs was built before the technology of welding aluminum was developed," Tyler said.

"It's a lot of work," said Perrett. "I don't know how many hours we put in, but it was a lot of work."

Tyler's project was to build a PT boat for a friend in Houston.

"He knew I was looking for a big old boat with a lot of horsepower," Tyler recalled.

Charles Inman of Baytown, Texas, owned the boat and planned to restore it. He died before following through on his goal. Inman bought the boat in 1965 after finding it at the Avondale Shipyard near New Orleans, Tyler said.

It took Tyler two days to haul the boat on aerry-rigged trailer from Baytown. On the way, he had two blow-outs.

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"This boat has got more than 500,000 rivets in it," he said.

It originally had four 1,000-horsepower Allison engines that had no starters. To crank the engines, the boat was brought up to 15 knots by a fifth engine, a 500-horsepower Hall-Scott, and the Allison were thrown into gear. The Hall-Scott engine was also the only source of power with a reverse gear.

Perrett said the five engines, replaced with twin turbocharged V-12 Cummins diesels, were an anomaly in their day, a bad naval experiment.

"You tell marine people about these engines today, and they laugh in your face," Perrett said.

PT8 was a prototype, in competition with several other PT designs. It lost the speed competition, finishing last, but unlike its wooden counterparts, the hull was intact after smashing through 12-foot seas.

Retired Navy Capt. Robert J. Bulkeley Jr. wrote in his book, "At Close Quarters," that the PT8 was overweight when it was completed in 1940 because heavy fittings and fixtures had been used in its construction.

The PT boat competition, known as the Plywood Derbies, was held in 1941 to determine the best designs. It would be a 196-mile run at full throttle off the New England coast. Four boats dropped out because of structural problems. PT8 was last among the five finishers with an average speed of 30.7 knots.

A second competition was held a few weeks later in rough seas with waves up to 15 feet high. The PT8 finished last again with an average speed of 25.1 knots, and it was eliminated from the selection. One of the boats in the running and approved for contracts was entered by the Higgins Boat Co. of New Orleans.

A friend of Tyler's found a memo, dated Oct. 6, 1941, in the National Archives that shows Rear Admiral R.M. Brainard to naval fleet maintenance ordering the boat scrapped. Apparently an alternative plan for the vessel was being considered, but Brainard dismissed that suggestion.

"The history of the PT8 is well-known," Brainard wrote. "Over $600,000 has been spent upon the craft."

The memo complained that the boat lacked maneuverability and was ill-suited for cold waters.

Brainard continued. "The chief of naval operations recommended and the secretary of the navy directed scrapping of the PT8."

"Tyler's not sure how, but somehow Brainard's edict apparently wasn't followed. "Somebody disobeyed orders," Tyler said.

"The PT8 was rechristened as the YP-110 and served as a training vessel and a harbor patrol boat in U.S. Navy ports. After the war, it was used for training and for research in developing aluminum hull boats, according to Bill Bohmfalk of Key West, Fla.

Bohmfalk looked at buying the PT8 from Inman 10 years ago, but decided against it because its renovation would be more costly than he could afford.

"What I liked about that boat, it was part of the original squadron of PT boats," Bohmfalk said.

He waited until he found PT 728, buying that boat from the producers of "JFK - Reckless Youth."

"We just literally put her in the water 20 minutes ago" after two years of refurbishing, Bohmfalk said in a telephone interview.

Bohmfalk motors his boat around the U.S. coast. Tyler doesn't plan to charter the boat or sell it to anyone else, and he doesn't have any special cruises planned.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," he said. "But I didn't rebuild this thing to sit still."