

Local ties to preservation of a World War II patrol boat

Lac du Flambeau's Simpson Electric and PT-305

By Brian Jopek
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The story begins with a United States Navy patrol torpedo boat, better known as a PT boat, being restored at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Built in 1943 by Higgins Industries in New Orleans and one of the few PT boats to survive the war, PT-305, which during its time in Navy service was known affectionately by crew members as *The Sudden Jerk*, *The Bar Fly* and *The Half Hitch*, has been undergoing a multi-year restoration at the museum.

While most of the PT boats that served in the Pacific war were stripped of equipment and weapons and destroyed instead of being returned to the States, PT-305 and the other boats in its motor torpedo boat squadron, known as Ron 22, were already back home from duty in the war's European theater and were being prepared to be sent to the Pacific.

However, the Japanese formally surrendered in September 1945, and Ron 22 was decommissioned shortly afterward.

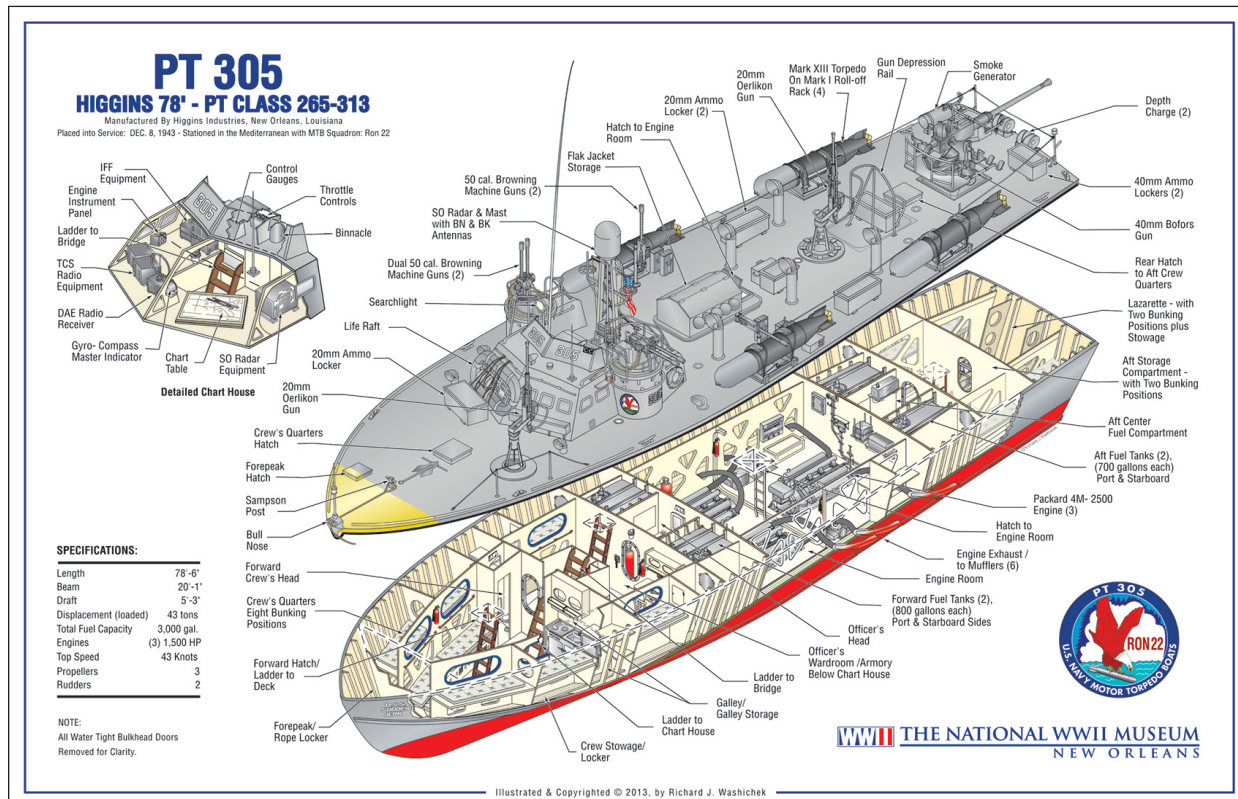
PT-305 and the rest of the boats that had served with it were ultimately sold in 1948, and at that point the war veteran began the next leg of a long journey as an oyster boat in the Chesapeake Bay.

According to the museum's website, "PT-305 continued as an oyster boat for many years until 2001, when it was acquired by the Defenders of America Naval Museum in Galveston, Texas."

"In June 2006, The National WWII Museum was contacted by the Defenders of America Naval Museum about the possible transfer of PT-305," the website reads. "The vessel was transported to the Museum campus in April 2007. With the help of the faithful Higgins boat volunteers, PT-305 will be completely restored to her wartime condition. Everything except the weapons will be fully operational."

The goal is to have PT-305 run at least one more time in fully operational status on nearby Lake Pontchartrain.

Robert Stengl, the project's manager,



said the restoration of PT-305 is now in its sixth year.

He's been in charge of procuring a large number of vintage pieces and other materials that will make PT-305 as close to how it was when it was put into service during the war.

"It's 95-percent complete," he said of the boat's restoration.

Lac du Flambeau connection

Jon Schmitz, chief executive officer for Simpson Electric in Lac du Flambeau, said he received a phone call in August 2015 from Aaron Henry.

Henry is a volunteer on the project to restore PT-305.

"He asked me about Simpson and if we were still in business and so on," Schmitz said.

Simpson Electric has been in existence in one form or another since the 1930s.

Its founder, Ray Simpson, developed the earth-inductor compass used by Charles Lindbergh during his flight across the Atlantic in the "Spirit of St.

Louis" in 1927. Years later, in the 1960s, the company would produce the cross-pointer instrument used on the Apollo V spacecraft.

During World War II, Simpson Electric made the gauges that helped PT boat crew members known as "motor mechs" monitor the three huge, 1500-horsepower Packard V-12 engines that powered PT-305 and other boats like it.

That's what Henry's call to Schmitz was about.

"He brought up the possibility of having 12 gauges put together by Simpson," Schmitz said, adding that Henry inquired about the possibility of having them be a charitable donation to the project by Simpson Electric.

In the mid 1980s Simpson Electric became the property of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians.

"I told him I'd like to donate something but charitable tax exempt doesn't work for the tribe because they are tax exempt," he said. "I told him I'd work

something out. I sold the gauges to them at our cost."

It took several weeks to produce the gauges.

"You know, we just don't make those anymore," Schmitz said. "We have all the capacity to make them. We just don't do those specific gauges anymore."

'Made me feel good'

Schmitz said it made him, a combat veteran of the Vietnam War, feel good to be able to do something for the PT-305 project.

"It obviously made me feel good, because of the military thing, that connection," he said. "The tribe owns Simpson Electric and I know it means a lot to them as well. They're so supportive of their veterans."

Stengl, one of several volunteers on the PT-305 restoration, said "it is a pretty cool project."

"It's been an honor to work on a national treasure," he said.

For more on the history of PT-305 and its restoration, visit the website at <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/see-hear/collections/artifacts/pt-305.html>.

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