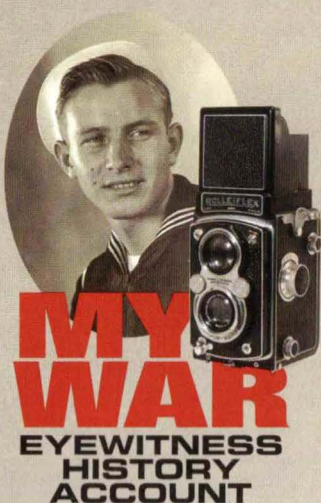




**MY
WAR**
EYEWITNESS
HISTORY
ACCOUNT

THOSE FIGHTING CRASH BOATS

Meeting the enemy was not what these fastest of all WWII Navy craft were designed for — but they did it anyway **BY FRED WEST**

We didn't like to be called a "crash boat." True enough, our official Navy designation was Patrol Aircraft Rescue Boat, but from the first, before we ever left the States for the invasion of North Africa, we were checked out by high-level gold-braid and classified "for special purposes." At first, vague references were made to commando raids, but as the war developed, so did our role.

Sixty-three-feet of streamlined plywood boat, we were a smaller edition of the PTs. Where the bigger craft had three banks of 12-cylinder, 1200-horsepower Packard engines, we had two. Like the PTs, we carried twin-mount .50-cal machine guns; unlike them, we carried no torpedos.

But fast! We were the fastest surface raft in the Navy, planing along at 54-kts even when fully loaded.

Crash boat? Hell, we led the invasion forces at Yellow Beach, south of Safi, on 8 November 1942, carrying an Army colonel who braced against our bridge with a bullhorn and directed his loaded landing boats as we raced for shore.

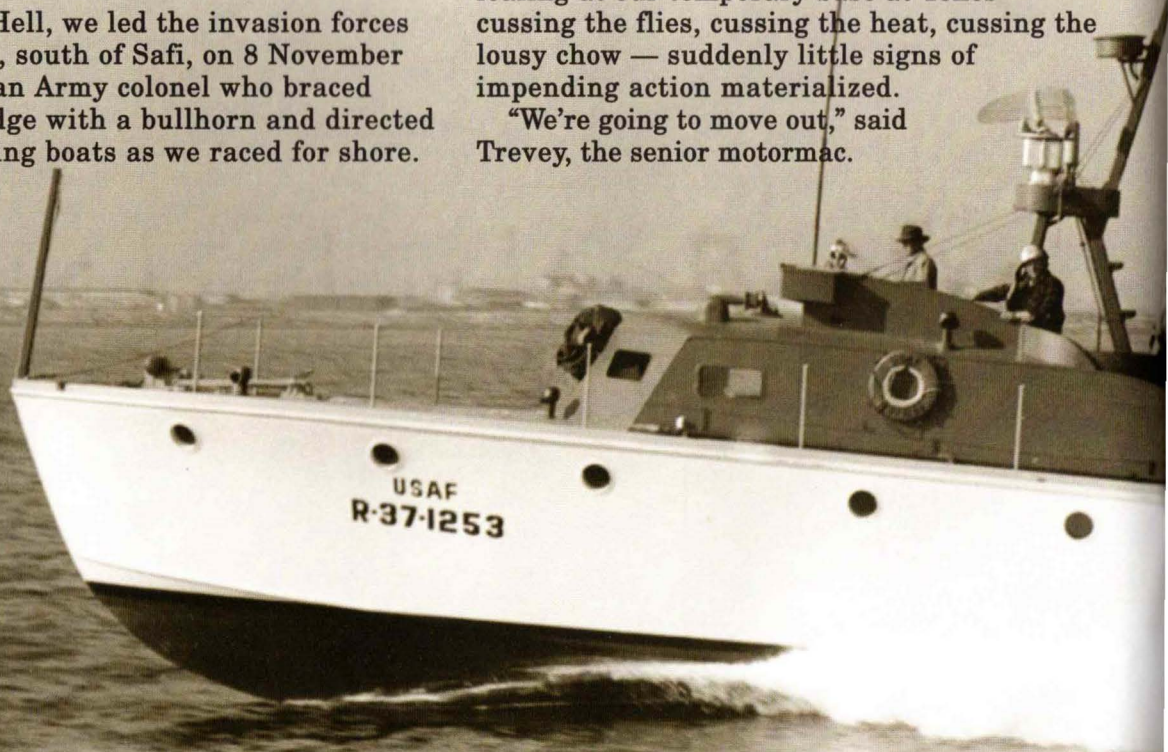
Later, some French citizens of Safi told us the Arabs watched us skimming across the sea and exclaimed: "It is against the will of Allah!"

During that winter and the following spring, as the war progressed eastward across North Africa and through the Mediterranean, we did other specialized jobs — such as running cloak-and-dagger agents across the sea to drop them under cover of darkness on the southern fringe of Europe. Sometimes we operated alone, sometimes paired with a sister ARB.

Scuttlebutt passed around about the eventual attack on what Churchill termed the "soft underbelly" of the Axis, but nobody told us on the *Lucky 7* that we were designated to participate in Operation *Husky*, the invasion of Sicily.

Then, around the first of June, after weeks of loafing at our temporary base at Tenes — cussing the flies, cussing the heat, cussing the lousy chow — suddenly little signs of impending action materialized.

"We're going to move out," said Trevey, the senior motormac.



"How do you know?" I asked.

"The chow's improving. And they're being nice to us at the chow hall."

Since the 8 November invasion, we were sometimes the neglected orphans of the Allied forces, and sometimes the fair-haired favorite, depending on whether or not we had done anything spectacular recently. Since we had little space to carry provisions, and never any ice for our miniature icebox, eating was always a problem. When possible, we tried to line up at the Army — or Seabees — mess halls at the various bases along the lower rim of the Mediterranean.

"Anytime people start being nice to us, we're ready to move," agreed Masters, the coxswain.

Sure enough, during the second week of June a PT eased into our little harbor and docked near us and a full lieutenant stepped off. He and our skipper went into a huddle, and the next day we were underway back to Oran for overhaul. All hands brightened up; inaction was demoralizing, and cabin fever sets in early on a small craft. Something was brewing.

While we were on the skids in Oran, shiploads of prisoners from the Eastern Front continually unloaded — some French, some German, some Italian. Our excitement began to build up, fed by the sight of troop transports and LSTs on the horizon, filing eastward. Then the overhauling of the Packard engines was completed, and we headed back to Tenes.

"Lighten ship," the skipper

said the morning after we got back to our base. We looked at each other and grinned.

Action! At last! For a while it had looked as though the war was going right on by, leaving us behind.

We were joined by four or five more ARBs plus the PT, which obviously was to be the flagship of our new squadron. Most of the morning we spent hauling excess gear over to a blockhouse on the far side of the docks, which we had commandeered and named our Petty Officers' Club. Extra clothes went; rifles and cases of .30-cal ammo; a well-padded and nailed-tight case of brandy we had acquired along the way; even the bazooka and its ammo that we had been carrying in case we ran up on a German submarine.

When we got back to the boats, we met a crew of strangers swarming all over them.

"We're Beach Jumpers," a pink-cheeked kid in a flukey jacket told me as I stepped aboard the *Lucky 7*. I was sweating in a skivvie shirt; I wondered how he could stand that jacket.

"We'll be hitting the beaches."

"In our boats?"

"Yeah, like commandos."

So that was why the flukey jacket and whipcord trousers. Special uniform.

"Okay, we'll be decoys."

"We?" I looked at him, a little teenager with a chipmunk grin. A commando? Then I looked at the other two messing around on the bridge. One was of indeterminate age, and looked for all the world



Up on its step, a 63-footer was photographed at speed. This particular craft was one of a small number modified for the USAF during the early 1950s and given the extra designation of Mk. II.

like a caricature of an Irish leprechaun. The other was slim and trim and gray-haired.

"I was a lieutenant in the American Expeditionary Force in World War I," he said proudly, coming over with his hand extended,

Good Lord, I thought, these were the American version of commandos? And what did that little twerp mean by "decoys"?

When we left the building yards in Miami last summer, the *Lucky 7* had carried a pharmacist's mate; and midships was a large compartment with a wide fixed bunk against both port and starboard bulkheads — the sickbay compartment for our sea-rescue role. But that purpose had been scrapped early; the medic was transferred off, and the sickbay became a combination armory and general storage area. Now our three Beach Jumpers moved into this space. The rest of their outfit distributed themselves about equally in the growing squadron of Mosquito Boats.

The last week of June we spent nailing canvas over portholes and other places that might leak light during night runs, and painting everything a darker gray. The Beach Jumpers brought aboard and rigged more of their gear.

"Noise-making equipment," the leprechaun said.

"Those are smoke-pots," I corrected him — pointing to the canisters on the short fantail of the boat.

He grinned. We had soon discovered that this character had an unbelievable knack of evoking spirits from the damndest materials; and his cocktails weren't half bad. Such a talent was, of course, duly appreciated, but I had some serious doubts about his "commando" qualities.

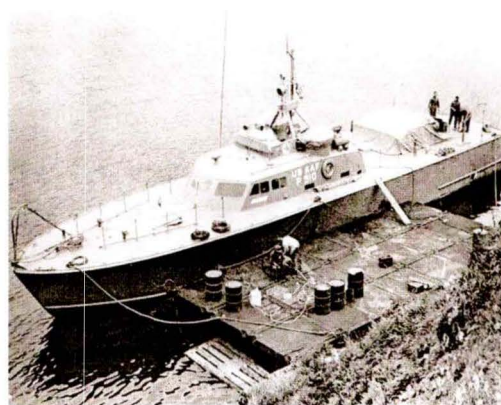
The squadron continued to



Royal Australian Air Force 63-footer.

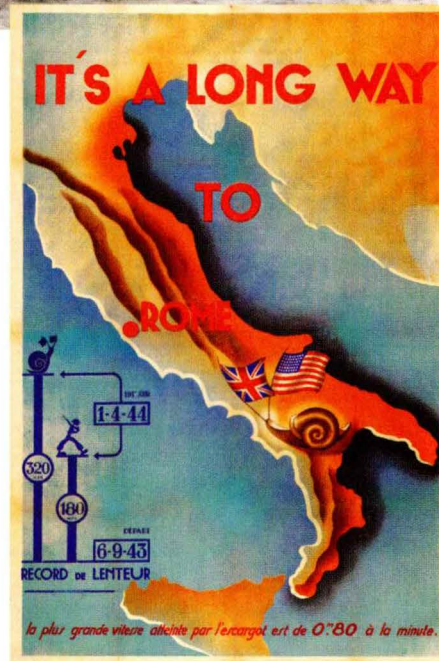


Early 63-footer undergoing testing.



USAAF P-910 85-ft was photographed in use in Alaska during WWII. As noted in the text, tracing the history of the 63-footers is difficult since the majority of records have been lost/destroyed plus they seem to have been a poorly photographed class of ship.

build up, more mysterious equipment was installed, and we kept going out for maneuvers, despite increasingly bad weather. We now consisted of a dozen boats divided into Groups *Able*, *Baker*, and *Charlie*, plus the PT flagship. Lieutenant Bryant was executive officer; the "Old Man" was Cmdr. Robinson, a Navy Reserve officer who, scuttlebutt said, had been a regular Navy officer. Whatever his background and former rank, he had an abrasive personality and



Propaganda poster "It's a Long Way to Rome" issued by the Germans in April 1944, pointing out to British and American troops that their advance up the Italian peninsula had been literally slower than the pace of a garden snail.



The Miami Shipbuilding Corporation headquarters during WWII. Built in the Art Deco style (the entrance had a large bas-relief panel depicting a man holding a ship aloft while kneeling in water and surrounded by a ship's helm, propeller, and nautical gear), MSC suffered after the end of the war and went bankrupt. In the early 1980s, the now derelict building was given a new lease on life when it was utilized as police headquarters for the popular television show *Miami Vice*. It then went on to be utilized in numerous other movies and television shows. A lot of noise was made about preserving the historically important structure but it was recently bulldozed.

THE 63-FOOT AIR SEA RESCUE BOAT

Founded in 1939, the Miami Shipbuilding Corporation, formerly known as the Fogel Boat Yard, received the first US Navy contract for the construction of small, fast, and lightly-armed "Crash Boats."

During 1940, Miami Shipbuilding Corporation (MSC) learned that the Union of South Africa was interested in purchasing rescue boats that the builder would guarantee to make 42-kts. The most powerful engine on the market was the Packard M-2500-W8 of 1250-hp, but the US Navy had restricted their use to PT-Boats. The Hall-Scott Defender of 630-hp was attractive but the entire production run for 1940/1941 had been sold to the British. The third most powerful engine was the Kermath Sea Raider of 500-hp and it was available.

MSC made the decision to utilize four Sea Raiders to obtain 2000-hp and then design a ship capable of 43-kts around these engines. The result was the 63-ft Aircraft Rescue Boat. Including all its variants, some 740 units were built, thus making it the most produced Aircraft Rescue Boat.

Launching the first US Navy crash boat later in 1940, MSC entered into production on what would become one of the most storied ship designs of WWII — the PT-Boat. Though MSC only built two prototype PTs before further contracts were passed to more experience builders, the yard received a large contract for building crash boats for the Lend-Lease program, particularly for Russia. MSC ended up building 50 of the type by the end of 1943. Further orders followed from Allied navies and by the end of the war, MSC had sent over 200 crash boats down its ways for the Russian, British, Australian, Dutch, and South African military — a large part of the 329 boats MSC built during the war.

The USAAF utilized only the 63-ft boat, although in several variants, during WWII. These were the Models 314 and 416. The Model 314s were acquired through Navy contracts. MSC built 146 Model 314s, but specific boats that were in Navy service are almost impossible to research since most of the production records were either lost or destroyed. The Model 416 was built to Army specifications.

Collectively all 63-footers were often referred to as *Class III* Boats. During WWII, these boats were painted gray but there were a few painted over black in the Philippines for special operations.

A variety of designations have been used for the 63-footers but the most common is AVR-63 (Auxiliary [or Aircraft, depending on source] Vessel, Rescue). Some sources state the "V" was the designator for an aviation related vessel, as on aircraft carriers.

AVRs were designed by Dair N. Long and compared to the better known PT-Boats, were relatively lightly armed with four .50-cal guns in two tubs. Their role was expanded beyond the original design intent to move in quickly and retrieve downed airmen. Primary defensive system was maneuverability and speed.

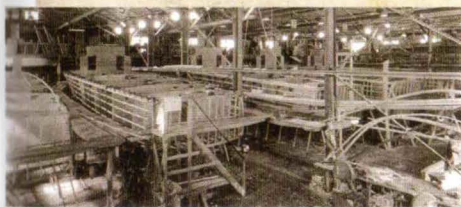
In the Navy, some AVRs become sub chasers and patrol boats. For this, AVRs had their offensive systems include depth charge racks aft. In addition, a 20mm Oerlikon was mounted on the aft deck. In the South Pacific, many crews mounted an additional .50-cal on the bow for extra firepower as well as adding more weight to the foredeck to assist the AVR in getting on plane more quickly.

Today, Randy Cunningham of Vancouver, British Columbia, has the last unconverted 63-footer. After the war, many of the vessels were sold surplus and in Canada they were used in the logging industry. In 2006, Randy found *P-619* languishing in the Sacramento Delta where he was able to purchase the craft. He then towed the vessel back home for restoration. Today, *P-619* is virtually complete to serve as a reminder of a very interesting period of Naval history.



Randy Cunningham moving *P-619* back to Canada.

Today, the virtually complete *P-619* is the only example of its type still surviving in WWII condition.



Factory view of the 63-footers under construction.

was given to fits of temper during which he chewed out officers as readily as enlisted men. Since he gave vent to those demeaning sessions in public, the boat skippers detested him thoroughly.

Some of the late-arrival ARBs

were equipped with only .30-cal machine guns.

"Not much firepower," I commented to Swede, our signalman, who also manned the starboard .50s. I handled the port barbette.

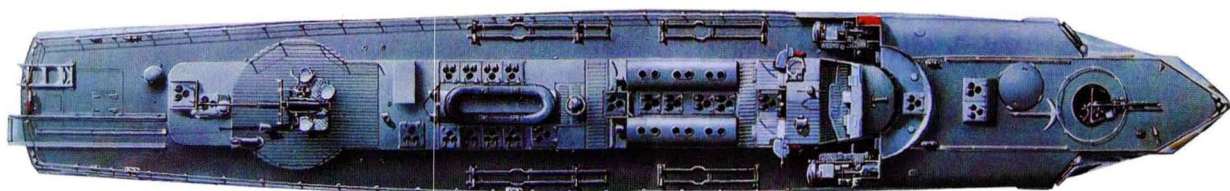
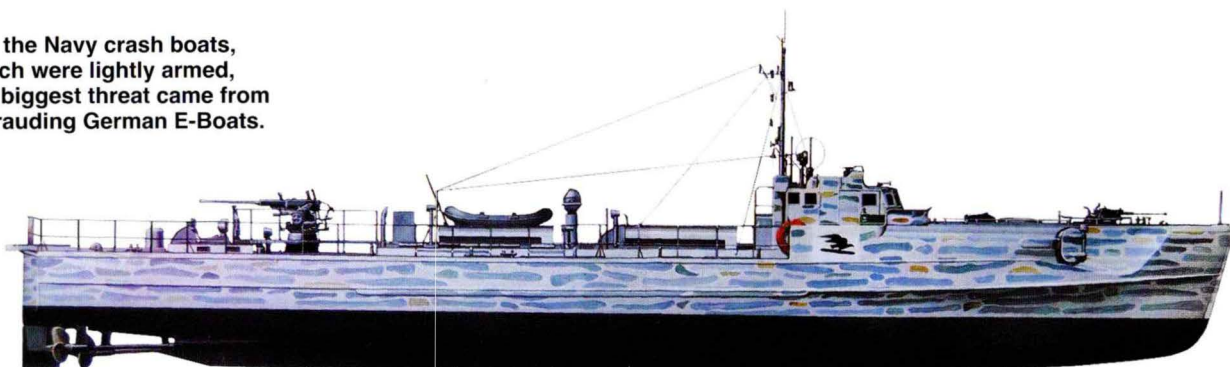
"Maybe we're not going to do any shooting," he said.

Before dawn on 29 June we got underway — the entire squadron — and headed eastward through fog so thick that had it not been for the keen hiss of our bow wave we could have believed we were thundering through clouds. As it

The government of South Africa was partially responsible for the creation of the 63-ft rescue vessel. During WWII, the South African Air Force Motorboat Wing received 19 of the MSC craft and *R20* is illustrated.



For the Navy crash boats, which were lightly armed, the biggest threat came from marauding German E-Boats.



was, we had to keep a sharp lookout to maintain position, and not run into one another. That wasn't always easy: First one boat and then another developed engine trouble, or ran low on fuel, and dropped out at Bougie and Bone to shape up and catch up later.

Although we were blanketed in fog and rain most of the run, the entire squadron kept all guns uncovered and manned. Overhead — when we could see — the *Luftwaffe* roared back and forth, generally chased by Spitfires. When we couldn't see them, we could hear them. We ate K-rations; the Perko Primus stove in the galley was, as usual, out of order. Monty, our aging AEF lieutenant, was as adept at conjuring up good coffee as the leprechaun was at booze. When Trevey was off watch in the engine room, he and Monty rigged a piece of wide angle iron against a blowtorch, and this served as an *ersatz* stove for coffee making.

We made Bizerte harbor in the afternoon of 2 July. The place looked like a bombing practice area and, in fact, it was. German bombers hit regularly each evening right after dusk and each morning between four and five. Very punctual, they were.

The wide harbor showed scattered markers to their bombing accuracy: The masts or other structures of sunken ships.

We moored at the PT base, already established by L/Commander Barnes and Squadron 15, and happily accepted an invitation to join their chow line. They had a cook who was reputed to have the incredible talent of preparing Spam so it couldn't be recognized. Too good to be true — we still tasted Spam. But the base did have showers, so we had our first fresh-water baths in days.

Bizerte was hot as hell, and the place crawled with



The crew of P-399 takes some time off during WWII.

The British made wide use of the 63-foot design and one vessel was photographed picking up the crew of a downed Halifax bomber from the English Channel.

flies. Our uniform was skivvies and sandals, and nothing else, as we worked the next few days overhauling guns and belting up yards of ammo for the .50s. Every third cartridge was a tracer; all signs indicated that our action would be night action. And the Beach Jumpers installed still more equipment.

"Sound machinery," said our young mate with the chipmunk grin.

Not sounding gear; noise-making apparatus. Recordings of anchor chains rattling through hawse holes, of LST ramps dropping, and tanks rumbling ashore, of bombs exploding.

"Who thought up this brilliant idea?" Trevey asked.

"Doug Fairbanks."

We didn't know if he was kidding or not. (EDITOR'S NOTE: Douglas Fairbanks, the noted film star, was indeed a PT skipper in the Mediterranean at this time.) But most of us agreed that things were going too far when the Beach Jumpers wired explosives to the bridge, to blow up the *Lucky 7* in case of capture. Those explosives were for real; the rockets in the "mousetraps" rigged on our forecastle carried only flash and noise. That might be okay for the movies, but not for us!

"Snafu," Swede commented. We all agreed.

The air raids continued, the heat grew worse, and the Old Man continued to treat his junior officers to sarcastic tongue-lashings. Morale was decidedly at



The crash boats were used in most theaters during WWII and then many were taken over by the USAF and suitably modified for that service's needs.



The Royal Australian Navy benefitted from the 63-ft crash boats when the service received 21 examples through Lend-Lease. Named *Air Chief*, the boat is seen at rest in its compound at HMAS Creswell, Jervis Bay, Australia.

low ebb when the squadron finally got underway the morning of 8 July — heading for Pantelleria, our new advance base. On the way we passed a convoy that stretched for miles over the sea, which was now as smooth as any travel poster picture, and the sight of all those warships and transports gave a much needed shot to our spirits.

Pantelleria, a tiny volcanic cinder of an island less than a hundred miles south of Sicily, had been bombed and blasted by Allied aircraft until it was utterly dismal looking. But the little bay that we rumbled into that afternoon had to be one of the most beautiful places we had yet seen — its smooth sandy bottom perfectly visible beneath fathoms of the clearest water.

Scuttlebutt was replaced by straight dope: We were to set up diversionary runs far away from where the actual invasion forces would hit, in hopes of making the Axis defense forces believe we were a big-scale landing party, and thus attracting mobile defense elements away from the actual landing targets.

"Guns," Trevey said, "how do you like us being sitting ducks?"

"It beats stewing in the heat and flies of Bizerte," I

said. "Anyway, we won't be sitting ducks. That is, if you make damn sure these engines are working."

By the morning of 9 July, our smooth teacup of a harbor changed into a bubbling cauldron as gale force winds whipped across its poorly shielded perimeter. The smooth sandy bottom provided no grip for our anchors, and our boats drifted and bounced around like chips. The head was below-decks, all the way forward, and nobody dared to go below, no matter how urgent the need. The way the boat was pounding up and down in the irregular waves, a man would be battered to death. It had happened before. We clung to whatever superstructure or rigging furnished handholds, and dragged up the anchor by hand, then cast

again, hoping for purchase on the bottom.

"Meteorology promised us a calm and dark night for tonight's operations," Nick grunted as I relieved him at the anchor line. Nick was the radioman, but on the *Lucky 7* specialty ratings didn't count for too much. Everybody did everything.

At evening, we beat our way in to the docks where the harbor was calm enough for us to fill our fuel tanks. With 2500-gal of high-octane gasoline aboard, we were a floating Molotov cocktail just waiting to ignite. As far as I know, none of the men ever dwelled on this distressing — and very real — possibility.

"Are we going on a run tonight or not, sir?" I asked the Skipper.

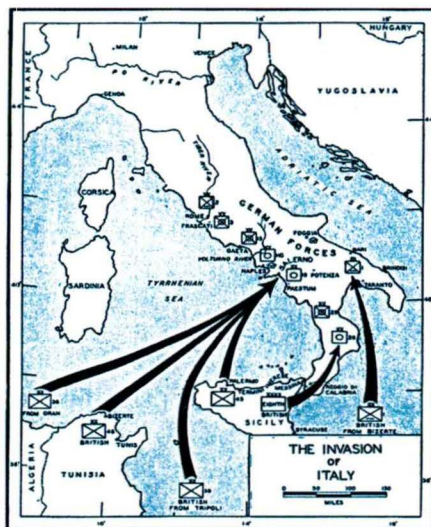


HMAS *Air Chief* photographed from a similar ship. Note the twin Vickers machine guns mounted next to the cockpit. HMAS *Air Chief* was commissioned on 12 August 1944. On 18 March 1945, she rescued a Royal Navy Grumman Hellcat pilot whose engine caught fire. He ditched the burning aircraft into the ocean and was picked up by *Air Chief* and returned to his carrier, HMS *Ruler*.

He shook his head hopelessly; he didn't know, either.

But just in case, all the boats unloaded all spare gear to lighten ship. We would need all the speed we could muster for this action. Scuttlebutt was, the coast defenses included large-caliber guns plus prowling German E-Boats, the Nazi version of PT. Well, we could always outrun them.

HMAS *Air Chief* at speed off Sydney Heads. As time went by, the wooden construction of *Air Chief* went downhill and in 1966 she was found beyond economical repair and sold off.



Map of the allied Invasion of Italy, 1943.

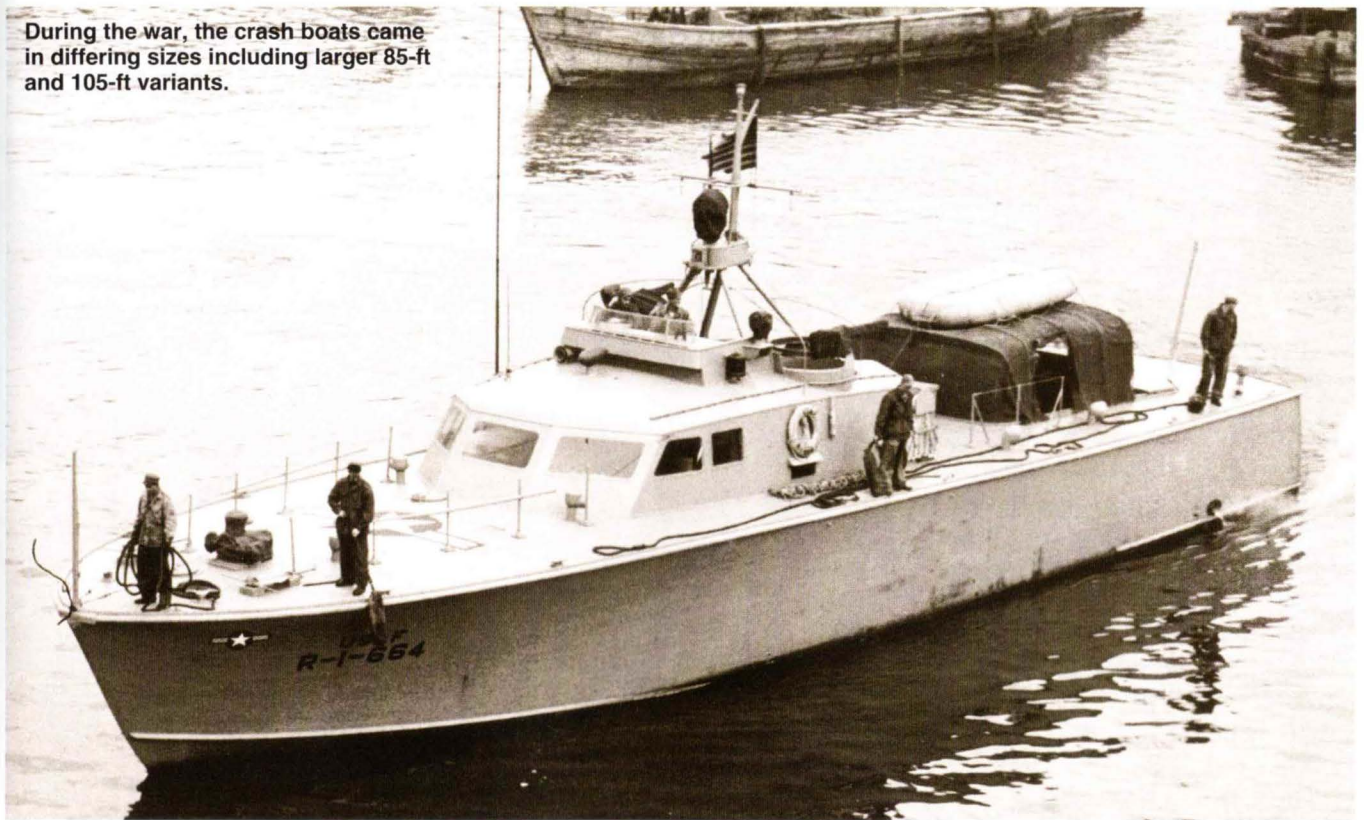
“We’ll hit ‘em with our rockets,” the leprechaun said. I looked at him and wondered if he’d been sampling his latest alcoholic experiments.

The weather didn’t improve. Nick caught bits and pieces of radio talk — as far as anybody could tell, the operation was on for tonight, but it was going to be one hell of a mess. Then toward sundown, while I was doing a final check on the machine guns, we got a distress call from one of our boats that had been out on a scouting run. Her engines had kicked out, and she was drifting helplessly toward Sicily. We went out to search for her.

Visibility was 50/50. Fifty percent of the time we were perched on top of 10-ft waves, and 50% of the time we were lost in the hollows. Just before darkness socked in completely, we found the lost one. We maneuvered ahead of her and threw back a towline, which she secured to her bow and our skipper hit the throttles. If we were to make that diversionary run tonight, we’d have to hurry.

The towline snapped! The cable-taut line whipped forward, all the way to the bridge, whacking Lt. Bryant between his shoulders.

During the war, the crash boats came in differing sizes including larger 85-ft and 105-ft variants.



"Goddamn!" he howled above the noise of the gale. "Get another line out!"

We parted two more lines before we finally got our crippled sister boat back into harbor and alongside the docks — and it was nearly midnight. The rest of the squadron bobbed and bounced about; nobody had to be told the weather was far too heavy for us to make it to Sicily, much less perform any spectacular mission.

"Meteorology stinks," Nick said. That summed it up for everybody.

Early the next morning planes were roaring overhead. Later, the seas calmed somewhat and, later still, some PTs put in for a rest on their way back from Sicily to Bizerte. They reported that they had been unable to carry out most of their mission because of rough weather. By noon, Nick and the radiomen on the other boats had picked up scraps of information on the night's work. Because of the bad weather and heavy seas, parts of the invasion fleet had cancelled out, and some ships' batteries had shot hell out of a number of the Allied planes dropping paratroopers.

"This," Trevey said caustically, "will probably be written up as a carefully planned, perfectly executed operation."

We were thoroughly disgusted at missing out on the initial invasion, but Sicily was far from secured; so the next night we went out to do what we should have done the night before. The seas were

considerably calmer as we drove due north to our target: One of the westernmost capes of Sicily, far from where the actual landing-support operations were going on.

We had bright moonlight until shortly after midnight when the moon dropped below the horizon and we all breathed easier.

Invisibility was just what we needed.

Then, suddenly, a flare went high into the air far to port, hung there like a detached searchlight for half a minute, then as suddenly went out. We were close to land.

"Careful, men," our Skipper called to Swede and me in the machine gun barbettes,

The *Lucky 7* broke away from the rest of the squadron, and a couple of minutes later I heard a hissing sound from our stern.

Our Beach Jumpers had opened up the smoke tanks and we were laying a heavy smokescreen, and even in the darkness I could see that we were practically sliding along the shore itself, portside to. The other boats in Group *Able* were trailing diagonally on our outboard quarter.

Then all hell broke loose, not from the shore but from our boats. All that weird Beach Jumper gear went into action — rockets soared at 45-deg, flaring like incandescent shells from bombarding warships — right behind the sight came



Interesting view of an RAF 63-foot rescue craft with a larger vessel.

Hall-Scotts cranked all the way up, four crash boats head out for a final test before being turned over to the Navy.



the sound: Amplified recordings of huge guns exploding so realistically that I still don't know if we felt concussion sound waves or just imagined it.

Then another noise broke through — the rattle of ramps dropping on LSTs and the rumble of tanks rolling off them.

These flukey things work after all, I thought. Somehow I'd had the feeling they were just toys, and we were all playing a Hollywood director's game.

The other side wasn't playing. The shells that began crashing about us were for real, and so were the huge spotlights that came on to sweep the shoreline.

"Get those lights!", Lt. Bryant yelled, and Swede and I cut loose with the .50s.

Trouble was, Swede was to starboard, and to level on the target he had to practically lay his gun barrels along my ears. I opened my mouth wide and yelled to relieve the pain as the pounding chatter ripped and tore at my eardrums.

To make matters worse, my right-hand gun chose that moment to stop firing. The left-hand .50 continued to fire, and trying to hold the bucking, jerking handlebars steady was like fighting an oversize gorilla.

The nearest searchlight went out; somebody had scored a hit, but there was no way of knowing whom. All guns on all boats were firing like mad, and the sound-effects gear was still going full blast.

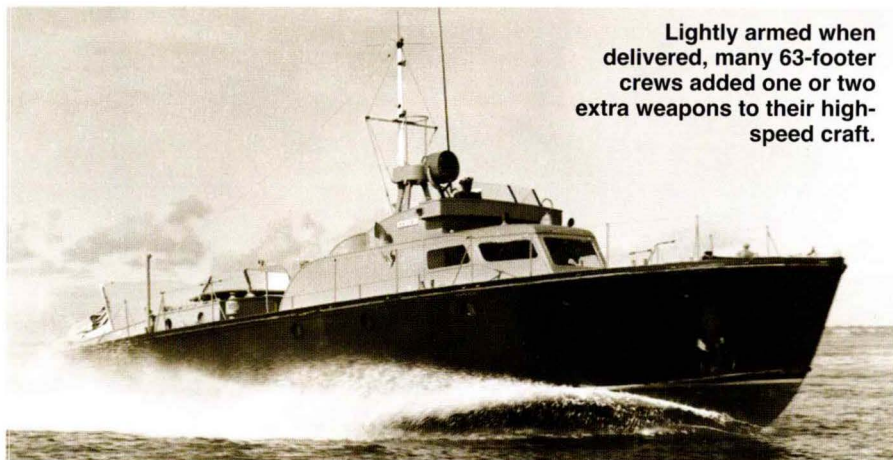
Without warning, we were illuminated like a ballpark.

"Star-shell!" I yelled, as the glowing torch floated casually above us under its parachute.

"Knock it down!" Bryant roared, and we shifted our gun barrels upward.

Immediately my head felt better without Swede's jackhammers beating out my brains.

By the time we knocked down that flare, a couple more were up and the shore batteries were finding us. We had attracted enough attention, now was the time to execute that old maneuver known as getting the hell out of town.



Lightly armed when delivered, many 63-footer crews added one or two extra weapons to their high-speed craft.

The Skipper brought the helm over hard to starboard and we leaned steeply as the *Lucky 7* spun about and headed for sea, throttles wide open.

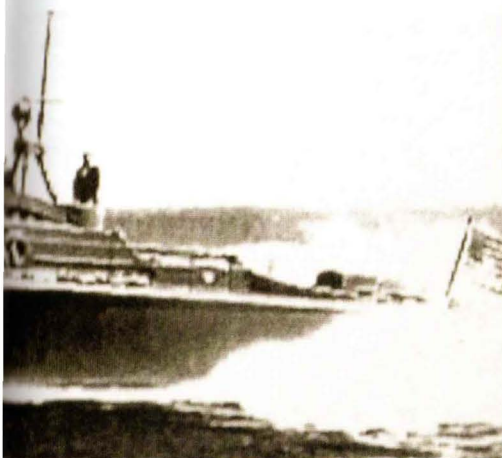
No need now for muffling our exhausts. Half-inch plywood! Our only protection now was speed, and we poured it on. Thank God, we'd taken off all that spare gear.

Even so, the falling shells kept tracking us and we went into a zigzag course in order to better dodge them. I looked astern and saw one of our boats suddenly leap into the air. A shell had exploded practically under her stern, throwing her a good 5-ft out of the water. But the beautifully balanced craft landed straight and kept running full speed.

Through seas still serrated with choppy waves we made it back to home base by mid-morning. Planes were shuttling back and forth overhead as we found anchor in Pantelleria bay, and all hands dropped on deck — or wherever — to sleep, all but a skeleton gun watch.

From a gunner's mate on one of the PTs returning to Bizerte I acquired a breechblock cam to replace the faulty one on my right-hand gun. My shoulders still ached from wrestling the unbalanced weapon while firing several hundred rounds of ammo.

That night we did it again, picking a target considerably distant from the previous one. There was still a lot of Sicilian shoreline that had not been hit by the Allied forces; it would be another month before the island fell. The seas stayed fairly calm this time, and the moon went down gradually, just like clockwork.

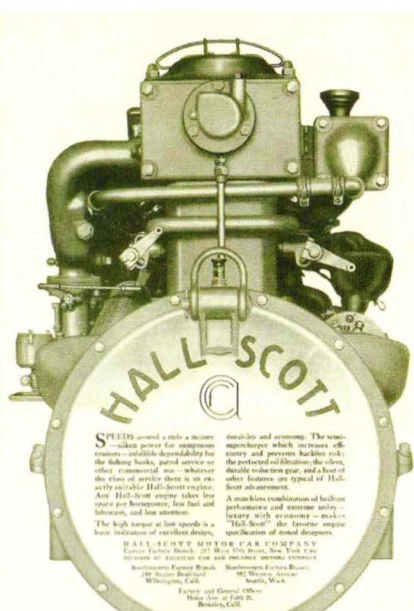


Just like the night before we cruised in close to shore, laying a heavy smokescreen. Then, just about the time our Beach Jumpers were getting ready to start their Hollywood routine, the Fourth of July erupted immediately ahead of us.

Swede and I pulled the stop-pins on our gun carriages and charged the .50s. Could it be a patrol of German E-Boats?

"Hold it!", Lt. Bryant commanded. Then, "Oh my God! We've run into Group *Charlie*!"

Sure enough, the third group of our squadron had stopped short of its scheduled target and started the



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decoy invasion routine. Since we were already laying a smokescreen, we simply joined *Charlie*, and for the next 10-min both groups set up a battle show fit for very wide-screen cinema.

Although the Italians were quite happy to quit the war, the German defenders got meaner as Sicily crumbled — and they'd had a taste of us the night before. Shells started dropping among us even before their star-shells went up to illuminate the area. Then the searchlight came on, and all the machine guns on the boats turned loose on them, knocking them out; but still the star-shells hung up there like so many bright moons, showing us spread out on the smooth sea like

pieces on a nautical chessboard.

We were fast, but on that immense spread of black sea it seemed that we barely moved as shells crashed among us, spraying us with geysers of outraged seawater. With that much light I could see the Skipper pressing hard against the throttles as we whipped about and zigzagged out to sea, away from the shore batteries and the relentless illumination shells.



With the end of the war, many of the 63-footers were sold surplus. However, the American military still had a distinct use for the speedy little boats. Surprisingly, the USAF had a number of the craft completely reconditioned and assigned to various Crash Rescue Boat Flights. This particular vessel was assigned to the 7th Crash Rescue Boat Flight at Tripoli, Libya, during 1954. Wheelus Field was an extremely busy base — as well as being very important to expanding American interests in the area. Because of its proximity to water, it was essential to have the craft operational and ready to rescue downed aircrew at a moment's notice.



Crew of a 7th CRBF in January 1954. All the men were attached to their "old" boats, but the 63-footers were being scrapped out as the USAF acquired newer vessels.

Sometimes after dawn we got back to Pantelleria. This time we hadn't been so lucky. One of our boats came limping in an hour later, a big hole through her hull and a propellor shaft bent. Still later, we heard scuttlebutt that one boat operating farther up the coast didn't return at all.

How effective were our diversionary runs? Afterwards, some war historians wrote us off as not even a nuisance to the enemy.

But a couple of days after our final run, the Army told us the Germans had issued a bulletin stating that they had repulsed a "major-scale invasion" at Mazara del Vallo.

That was our Beach Jumper show!

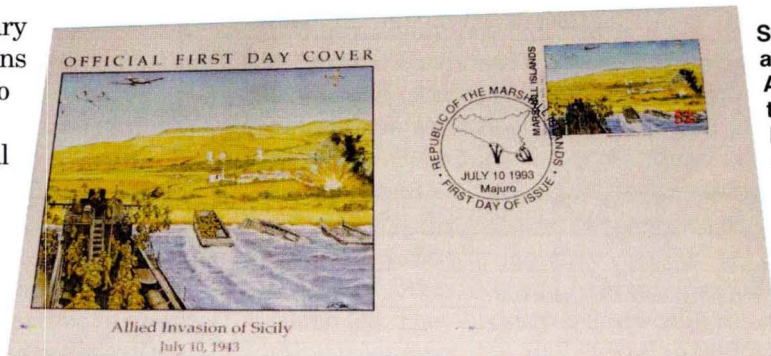
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Staff Sergeant Edward Beck was a ten-year Navy veteran aboard the 63-footers. During the war, he served on the crash boats in the Philippines and participated in 13 major actions. When he heard about the USAF's use of the crash boats, he changed services to get back into the action. Beck was photographed with his ship just after returning from a mission that rescued the crew of a Douglas B-26 Invader. The twin-engine aircraft was towing a target, but the fighter aircraft shot down the tug rather than the target! Fortunately, the crew survived to be picked up by the 7th CRBF.



Accommodations aboard the USAF's 63-footers were pretty basic.



Stamp commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Allied Invasion of Sicily on 10 July, 1943. The cover bears a cancellation from Majuro on 10 July, 1993.