Like all great stories, those that are the mythology of PT boats in World War II are a fascinating blend of fact and fiction.

It's not surprising that the tales of PT boats still hold captive the imagination of history seekers today. Decades after nearly all of the Navy's operational Pacific-based PT boats were torched Viking-funeral style on the beaches of Samar Island in the Philippines in the days following Allied victory in the Pacific, the lore of Motor Torpedo boats is kept alive most notably by the greatest American mythology of the last century—the Kennedy presidency.

The PT boat towed down Pennsylvania Avenue at President Kennedy's inauguration in 1960 allowed him to visibly connect with his war hero image, even while ushering in a new generation of hope and prosperity with his youth and vigor. And when 'Camelot' came crashing down with an assassin's bullet in 1963, only 20 years after the sinking of PT 109 near the Solomon Islands made its skipper a hero, PT boats became forever linked with JFK, one of the DAV's most famous members.

When the discovery of PT 109's wreckage made waves in newspapers late last year, it was not surprising to many PT boat veterans, even though they say the elements that made PT 109 so famous—individual heroics and high speed collisions aren't typical of service in the "Mosquito Fleet."

"Kennedy made a big name for PT boats with the movie and his inaugural parade," said Warren Mills, a motor machinists mate on PTs 323 and 328 in the Pacific. "People used to joke around and call us 'glamour boats,' because we got a famous reputation for doing a pretty good job of minimizing enemy island traffic in the South Pacific."

This famous reputation began on March 11, 1942, with the heroic rescue of Gen. Douglas MacArthur from Corregidor as the Philippines fell to the Japanese. The 35-hour, 580-mile trip through the Japanese-held sea from Corregidor to Mindanao was skippered by Lt. John D. Bulkely on PT 41. Months later, Lt. Bulkely received the Medal of Honor for his daring voyage, but, more importantly, his heroism had given hope and spirit to a nation shell-shocked by the attack on Pearl Harbor.

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When a triumphant MacArthur returned to reclaim the Philippines less than three years later, he would land ashore aboard PT 373. By this time, the number of PT boats in the Pacific had jumped from 18 to 212 vessels, despite earlier disdain from ranking Navy brass.

Squadron 4 was designated as the PT fleet's training squadron by the Secretary of the Navy in 1942, and found a headquarters at Melville, R.I. The Motor Torpedo Boat Training Center at Melville used combat veterans as instructors to train both officers and enlisted men who would serve in all facets of PT service. By mid-1945, the center had trained more than 1,800 officers and 12,000 enlisted men.

The increase in boats and crewmen was in direct proportion to the frustration PT boats brought to the enemy in the Pacific, English Channel, and Mediterranean.

Called "green dragons" and "devil boats" by the Japanese, the PTs used a combination of gunfire and torpedoes in high seas hit-and-run operations, before zigzagging away behind a smokescreen. In contrast to the largely exaggerated claims of PT boat attacks on Japanese destroyers, the boats had really earned their keep in the Pacific fleet with successful attacks on Japanese barges and shore batteries.

The two standard boats were built by the Electric Launch Company (Elco), Bayonne, N.J., which made the 80-footers that saw duty mainly in the Pacific, and the Higgins Boat Company, New Orleans, La., which crafted the 78-footers used primarily in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. The plywood-hulled boats usually had crews of 12, 2 officers and 10 enlisted men, or "bluejackets," and were armed with four .50-caliber machine guns (sometimes other guns were added) and four torpedoes. PT boats were propelled to speeds of nearly 40 knots by three 1,200 horsepower Packard engines.

Every knot of speed the boats could muster was essential: There wasn't an ounce of armor on the boats, a fact that didn't escape John Ashworth, a motor machinist's mate on PTs 187 and 330.

Mr. Ashworth, a DAV life member from Tampa, Fla., was among thousands of young sailors who had heard the stories of glory and adventure in the Mosquito Fleet, but turned down the chance to volunteer for PT boat service when the opportunity was presented to him in boot camp. (This dispels the long-held falsehood that all PT boat servicemen volunteered for the duty, although nearly all skippers and officers were volunteers.) When he was selected for PT boat duty anyway, Mr. Ashworth reported for duty at the New York Navy Yard in Brooklyn captivated by tales of glory about the "Knights of the Sea."

"One day I boarded my boat and saw a gunner's mate cleaning a loaded .45-caliber pistol. It went off, but he wasn't hurt, thank God, but I noticed something that disturbed me," Mr. Ashworth recalled. "The bullet went through the deck and the rest of the boat, and exited through the hull. We had to rush to plug the leak and fix the hole.

"I started thinking about all the lead that would be flying at us over there, then I wondered what I had gotten myself into."
Warren Mills believed that the speed of the boats is what kept its crew from losing sleep. “We could get away from a lot of things with our combination of speed and maneuverability,” Mr. Mills said. “We spent a lot of nights blasting away at shore batteries and keeping Japanese barges from fortifying islands with their troops.

“It was a lot like a drive-by shooting. We’d zoom up to a barge and release our torpedoes, or even swing by and strafe them with our guns.”

But Mr. Mills also learned first-hand of the vulnerability of motor torpedo boats when speed was removed from the equation. Shortly after being transferred to PT 323 (he had literally drawn the shortest straw), MM3 Mills was below deck in his boat, which was sitting still in the waters of Leyte Gulf, when the general quarters bell sounded.

“I knew something was wrong because the alarm sounded, and we didn’t start moving,” Mr. Mills said. “What I didn’t know was that four Japanese Zeros (fighter planes) had attacked, and our skipper and executive officer had been killed.

“We were just sitting ducks, dead in the water.”

MM3 Mills immediately assisted the “fantail” gunner at the rear of the ship, and the surviving crew members were able to successfully repel the assault until a damaged Zero crashed into the PT boat. The suicide attack hit mid-ship, knocking several men into the water, but amazingly the only deaths were the two officers killed in the initial attack.

“The water rushing in actually put out the fire in the engine room, which may have kept the boat from exploding,” Mr. Mills recalled.

While the last-ditch suicide attacks proved costly to the PT boats, operating at night kept them safe from most aerial attacks. It was often the unseen dangers that haunted the Mosquito Fleet on their nocturnal voyages.

Often the greatest danger to PT boats was operating in shallow reef areas. Grounded boats, along with encounters with mines, were all too common on barge hunting and recon missions, and the night patrols, some as long as 300 miles, stripped the nerves of bluejackets and officers alike.

During the day, the bluejackets got some sleep, made repairs, and prepared for the next night’s mission. At the start of the war, a lack of PT bases led to the creation of PT tenders—floating mother ships where PT boats could get supplies, gasoline, messing, showers, electric and engine repairs. Some tenders even towed floating dry docks.

The heat of the South Pacific was dreadful, and PT boaters adapted by sleeping under makeshift tents on deck and altering their clothing to less-than-regulation standards.

“Most of the time, you’d find us in shorts and sandals only. Officers were the only guys who wore shirts,” Mr. Mills said. “That didn’t help our glamour boat reputation.”

While the PT boats’ success in the Pacific, especially during the long and bloody Solomon Islands campaign, has always garnered the most attention, the Mosquito Fleet also made its presence known in the Mediterranean and the English Channel, including duty off the Normandy coast during the D-Day invasion.

“D-day was originally planned for June 5, so we departed on the fourth,” said Shelton Bosley, a gunner’s mate on PT 507, one of 12 PT boats in Squadron 34’s D-day force. “We were lucky to be intercepted by a friendly destroyer and told of the delay.”

“In the invasion, our PT boats were used to escort minesweepers on the western flank of the Normandy invasion,” Mr. Bosley said.

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Beyond D-day, the primary mission of PT boats on the European front of World War II was attacking surface ships and craft, and disrupting supply ships and troop movements. PT boats in Europe were also used to lay mines and to carry out intelligence work.

In Europe, the missions for PT boats often lasted as long as 10 days, which meant that the boats had to sacrifice the luxury of the cover of darkness. On these long missions, the boats were used to draw gunfire from shore batteries that would be pounded the next day by Allied ships.

"We went into the English Channel thinking U-boats would be our biggest menace, but minesweepers proved to be our main target," Mr. Bosley said. "We spent a lot of time near the heavily fortified Channel Islands trying to prevent Hitler from unloading supplies and troops."

On Aug. 16, 1944, six PT boats patrolling the Channel Islands, less than a mile off Jersey Island, found themselves in a confrontation with a German minesweeper in pea-soup fog and suffered one of their most horrible losses of the war.

Sixteen men from the group were killed, including nearly the entire crew of PT 509, which lost its skipper in the gunfight and accidentally rammed the German ship.

"The only survivor on the 509, John Page, later said that the stunned German crew just opened fire on the survivors in the PT boat, which was stuck in the side of the minesweeper," Mr. Bosley said. "Page had more than 30 wounds, but survived the attack."

John Page was taken prisoner aboard the enemy ship, where his wounds were treated. Later, a skilled German surgeon saved his life, and he remained a prisoner of war until 1945.

In addition to the 16 killed in the battle, nine more were wounded.

"It was dangerous duty, there's no doubt about it, but I was 18 years old, sitting behind the twin .50 calibers, and I got excited every time the engines were opened full-throttle," Mr. Bosley recalled. "At the same time, you're sitting on a plywood boat with 3,000 gallons of gasoline, torpedoes, and ammunition. If you're hit, you're done."

"We once had a gas tank hit by a 20-mm German shell that turned out to be a dud. It makes me think about how lucky we were out there. Fate can be both kind and cruel."

All too often, historians are callous in assessing victory and loss in naval battles. The water-bound showdowns are gauged by the number of ships destroyed and damaged. The human element—the pain, suffering, and loss experienced by sailors—has a way of getting lost in the bellies of those floating steel beasts.

But aboard PT boats, the loss could be as intimate as the proximity to the enemy. The relatively small size of the boats produced a tight-knit closeness unimaginable on larger ships, which were virtually floating cities. Perhaps this intimacy in the most hazardous of environments, rather than the wild war stories, the movies, books, the uniform eccentricities, and the Kennedy legacy, is the reason PT boats still capture our imagination today—and why PT boaters are such willing and vocal tellers of their wartime exploits even to this day.

In his official report to the Navy on the use of PT boats in World War II, aptly titled At Close Quarters, Capt. Robert Bulkley used the final paragraph to give proper credit to the legendary success of PT boats—brave men and fast vessels.

"The success of the PTs depended, and always will depend, on the ability and valor of their officers and men, on their eagerness to seek out the enemy and engage him at close quarters," Capt. Bulkely wrote. The spirit of their courage and determination, a spirit old in the Navy, was expressed on a sign at the PT base at Bougainville in the Solomons:

"Give me a fast ship, for I intend to go in harm's way." John Paul Jones