



**Tug Tales #3 September 2013**

**Updated 8/25/2013**

### **Our Tugs Are Capsizing? Don't Tell Anyone!**

*By Dan Friend dfriend001@cfl.rr.com*

A photo exists of one ST US Army tugboat built at the American Manufactory Corps or the Olsen Corp in DeLand that has a major problem. As it turned out, it was built with pipes and conduit running down one

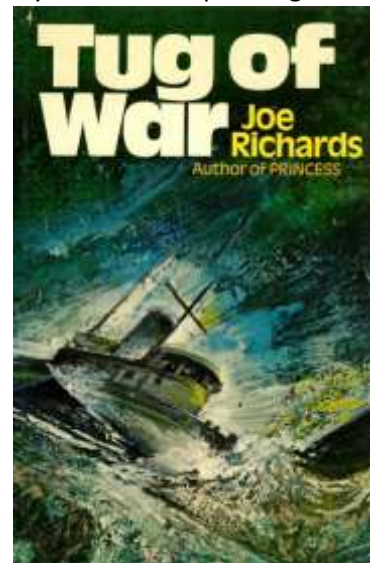
side of the interior of the boat instead of both sides. This error may have been done at the Beresford Boat works, or it might have been a mistake in the plans; but it doesn't really matter now. The photo shows one very important thing.

It points out the obvious tendency of an all-steel tugboat to easily tilt to port or starboard!

Tugs for generations had been built primarily of wood: even if the hulls were made of steel the upper areas would have been made of wood keeping the center of gravity relatively low. Due to pressing wartime needs, the small tugs at Beresford were built completely in steel inclusive of the cabins and pilot house areas. More than likely due to the urgent need orders were given to companies geared to making steel boats as they had employees with a different skill set from those making wood boats. Other orders went to those firms set up to work in wood: all were needed.

On the steel boats even the mast was steel. Adding guns and ammo on top of the pilot house made the tugs even more likely to capsize in even a moderately heavy sea. But that shouldn't be a problem: they were made for harbor use only.....

How many of the early steel tugs capsized in 1943 – 1944 trying to do the impossible is the real question. Only 18 Army small tugs are listed as being lost throughout WW2, and that includes war damage. That's out of over 500 hundred built or purchased, yet for many of the tugs inclusive of some from DeLand, no records exist at all after turning them over to the Army. Not a word. There may be a reason the number of lost ST tugs seems low. Their true loss may have become a war secret.



Author Joe Richards in his epic book "Tug of War" contends that the boats were deathtraps, and that's one reason he was given command of **ST250** and a mission impossible voyage *even without a license*. Desperation was in order, and after all, it was wartime and everyone was expected to give his all. Richards contends that by the time he accepted the job no one else would take it! Richards was expected to take his ST from New Orleans to the Panama Canal, then up to Los Angeles where he then was to sail with his ten man crew, basically alone, from there to Honolulu, Hawaii. A distance of over 2500 miles in winter time. And they didn't even give him a chronometer to measure longitude.

Thousands of GI's lost their lives in *US Sherman tanks* when up against far superior German Panzer and Tiger tanks. They were known as "Ronson burners" to all inclusive of the British, who also used them; due to thin armor, a weak main gun, and perhaps most importantly, a highly flammable gasoline engine.

4 or 5 of them could gang up on a German Tiger tank and perhaps the last one moving might take the German tank out with a shot to the rear area where the armor was weakest. The other brave tankers gave their lives to make it happen.

When war broke out our frontline fighter in the Pacific was the P-40. This slow obsolete plane performed miracles with the Flying Tigers early on, but clearly was no match for the dogfighting ability of the Japanese Zero. Our guys kept flying them until better machines like the P-47 Thunderbolt and the P-38 Lightning arrived to take charge of the situation.

Our US Army Air Corps B-17 Flying Fortresses were so named as they were promised to have enough machine guns to easily defend themselves against fighter attack. Thousands of Eighth Air Force airmen gave their lives to prove the theory incorrect, and the bombers were only really relatively safe after the arrival of the P-51 Mustang; a fighter with enough range to stay with the plane all the way to the target and back. The story of the Tuskegee Airman is the prime example of this with a record of no bomber lost while under their P-51 "Redtail" protection.

Countless other examples exist of inadequate designs and brave men during war, so perhaps the rumors of tugs capsizing in large numbers are exaggerated. Or possibly not. Here's what Joe Richards had to say in "*Tug of War*", written in 1973:

"It was the 6<sup>th</sup> day of February in 1943.....the **ST 49** was topheavy, overhatted as with any toy boat you could buy loaded with gizmos. She was something for a kid to pull along with a string on the beach. Her big hat was the steel pilothouse. Add a solid steel mast, a steel deckhouse and fidley, and an enormous steel stack, and you have the **ST 49**, endlessly in search of her center of gravity. So was her crew. The sea couldn't care less." **P. 17**

"...the **ST 49**. Erbe was a civilian sailor. ....When the Navy orders were handed to him with specific instructions as to the course he must follow in the run to New Orleans (*from Key West -DF*)he winked at me, shoved the orders in the chart table drawer and proceeded to follow a course imposed by the higher authority of wind, weather, and mercurial nature of the sea. We got there. Most didn't. It was not until the end of the war that I found out how many of these tugs had been lost by capsizing. It was like being told that you had sleepwalked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. **P. 27**

" ....As pretty as she was, the concept of a tugboat rendered completely in steel was a hallucination that only became a reality when the Army decided to have more seagoing tonnage under its command than the Navy. Traditionally, a tugboat was constructed so that her weight above the waterline was as light as spruce and plywood could make it. Even if the hull was made of steel, the topsides had to be constructed of light material. Her ballast, which gave her stability, consisted of the engine and her bunkers. On the **ST 250** not only was the deckhouse and the whole superstructure made of steel but the mast, which is always spruce on other tugs, was a series of steel pipes in diminishing size welded together. It was unbelievable and it was deadly. **P. 68**

"...I could see those monkeys in the drafting room up in Washington. The brass was breathing down their necks saying "We need a thousand tugs yesterday to draw those oil barges up through the inland waterway. Specify steel. We can get them done in a hurry.....They got them out in a hurry and they capsized in a hurry." **P. 69**

“...when I stepped aboard her low bulwark, I could actually feel the boat incline toward me. I couldn’t believe it in a boat that weighed close to a hundred tons. The center of gravity must have been up in the wheelhouse. When the rollers came in from a passing ship, she wanted to turn over right at the dock.” **P.69**

“...There was something insane about sending vessels out as poorly equipped to handle heavy weather as these. But then there is nothing sane about war. War is a maniac; urging the man in charge to do something, anything. The courage to do nothing, when nothing is the thing to do, has never earned a decoration. A smart marine operator would have rebuilt these vessels; kept them in port, or sent them out as deck cargos on Liberty ships.” **P. 95**

“...Did I hear you say that you took one of these small tugs to Hawaii?” “That’s right”, I said. I am with the War Department,” he said by way of introduction. “I am in charge of this operation”. ‘How do you do”, I said.

“Tell me,” he said, “how did you do it?” “Do what?” I said.

“Get her across the Pacific.”

It would have seemed tedious and irrelevant to go into details, my background in sailboats, my affair with the **Princess** (*his sailboat DF*), the admonition I had received from Captain Erbe, the casual conversion I had with a shellback in Newport Beach, the jettison of superfluous government property, (*Richards put the machine guns in the hull as ballast and tossed the heavy platforms! DF*) and my contempt for Navy sailing orders.

“Why do you ask?” I said.

The man from the War Department hesitated. “Go ahead,” I said. “You can’t hurt my feelings.”

“We lost so many,” he said.....

That was the end of ocean passages in small tugs. The War department found even more interesting ways to capsize them and dispatch their crews to a wet hereafter. They turned them over to the Navy, *which proceeded to tow them across the Atlantic Ocean for the invasion at D-Day” .....P. 213*

Was the War Dept man speaking of losses in the Pacific...or the Atlantic as well? Only a handful of ST’s....6 or 7....are recorded as lost prior to June of 1944 many with no place, reason, or date of loss. More research needs to be done, if possible, but it does seem plausible that far more ST’s sank than the official records indicate. Morale was key, and this would not be the first or last time a government inclusive of ours chose to conceal losses during wartime. Or out of desperation took something built for such a singular purpose to its practical limits..... and then some.

Those unrecorded ST losses might include early DeLand Warboats **ST 41 & 42** for which no records exist at all since 1943. Sadly, the instability issue might have also taken the first DeLand Warboat, the **ST 40**, the **Taylor**, which has only the sad recorded note, “*lost in WW2.*”

Author Joe Richards has passed on, but his epic tale of sheer gutsiness survives and conveys every bit of the terror and danger the men on the ST’s faced in rough weather. “**Tug of War**” is highly recommended.