

A Trio of PT Gunboats

(WWII High Speed Gunboats)

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PT59, 60, and 61 had more in common than just being in numerical sequence. They followed similar paths from launching almost to the end of the war.

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Index

1.	Purpose	3
2.	Forward	3
3.	Development of the U.S. PT Boat – A Quick Look	4
4.	The First Production PT Boats (in the U.S.)	4
5.	The PT48 class PT Boat (a sub-class of the PT20 class)	4
6.	Building PT-59, 60, 61 (initial construction)	5
7.	First Assignment (Melville, CT)	5
8.	Pacific Deployment (first war zone assignments)	6
9.	U.S. Gunboats in the Pacific (need develops for gunboats)	7
10.	Selected PT Boats Converted into Gunboats (PT-59, 60, & 61 selected)	7
11.	Back to the Pacific War as Gunboats	9
12.	Squadron Reports Pertaining to PT-59, 60, and 61	7
13.	The End of the Trio	8
14.	Photos - Drawings	9

Purpose

A lot of information on U.S. PT boats is available in books and on the internet. Previously, little has been documented focusing only the three Elco 77-foot PT Boats that were modified to be PT Boats in October of 1943. This document consolidates information found from various sources into one cohesive, flowing, true story of the PT-59, PT-60, and PT-61 into one document.

As this is not a formal publication so I have not included a bibliography. Sources include books, web sites, and information from various individuals that have a deep interest in preserving PT Boat history. I wish to thank all that helped me in this endeavor. Also, if there are any omissions or errors please contact me. My only purpose here is to put this information in one place for all to have access to.

This document may evolve over time as new information is found. Similarly, corrections will be made as I become aware of them.

Disclaimer: This document was created using information that I though had a good degree of reliability for the truth. As there is much information that is either no longer existing or unavailable at this time there may be some degree (as little as possible) of error.

Forward

This is the history of three Motor Torpedo Boats, commonly known as Patrol Torpedo Boats or simply “PT Boats.” As the role of the U.S. Navy’s PT Boats changed because of evolving changes to the engagements with the Japanese, the armament and tactics of PT Boats had to change as well. Conversions of other types of vessels (including landing craft) were not totally successful. All were unable to maintain the high speed need to keep up with the PT Boats so they could attack in unison. Three of the “older” PT boats became candidates for conversion into a High Speed Gunboat: PT-59, 60, and 61.

These three boats followed the same path from launching through shipment to the Pacific war zone and involvement in the war. It seems unusual for three numerically sequenced (59, 60, 61) PT Boats be modified as Gunboats be and assigned to the same squadrons throughout most of the war.

I begin these pages with a brief look at the development and production. There is plenty of information out there on PT Boats so here is some basic information on how these three PT Boats fit into the scheme of the five hundred thirty-one PT Boats in service in the United States Navy during World War Two.

Also note that after these PT Boats were converted to Gunboats and had their torpedoes removed it is quite apparent that they still used the designation “PT” as indicated in official records.

These three “PT Gunboats” was a temporary fix to fill the need of having high speed gunboats stay in formation with the rest of the squadron’s PT boats. Their lives were short and relieved from duty as new heavily armed PT arrived from the U.S.

PT Boats were assembled in a squadron, often referred to as “Ron.” The terms Ron, PTRon, and MTBRon are common. In the case of Ron 3, there were two. The first one, Ron3, all of the original squadron’s PT Boats were lost. Later, a new squadron identified as RON 3(2) was formed.

Development of the U.S. PT Boat A Quick Look

In the late 1860's the first boat to transport and fire a self propelled torpedo was developed in the United Kingdom. Before and during WWI, Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB) were developed. Successes in using small MTB's against large warships brought about the "Torpedo Boat Destroyer" – later becoming simply a "Destroyer."

The next phase of development of the Patrol Torpedo (PT) boat was in hull design as well as high powered engines. This all happened in the 1920's and 1930's. A lot of the development was found in the boat racing field where trophy competition was held.

American PT boats trace their beginnings back to a British Design by Hubert Scott-Paine. Elco (Electric Launch Company) purchased a boat and the design and after testing enhancements were made. Elco then built the prototype which became PT-9. (PT-1 through PT-8 were experimental boats built by several companies.) Initially, ten more Elco boats were built, becoming PT-10 through PT-19. These ten new boats were 70 feet long and now had three 1200 horsepower V12 Packard Marine engines. A future PT boat skipper, Ken Prescott would call these boats "floating firebugs" because of the large tanks full with volatile high octane aviation fuel.

Other PT boats from Higgins and Huckens were also built but not covered here. The last Elco 77-foot PT boat was PT-68. After that, Elco went on building a larger (80-foot) boat with numerous enhancements and changes. Likewise, this is also not covered here.

The First Production PT Boats

Three companies vied for PT Boat contracts, Elco, Higgins, and Huckins. (Near the end of the war a few PT Boats were built by Vosper for the U.S. but did not see any action in the U.S. Navy.) After sea trials, it was

determined that the ten 70-foot PT boats (PT-10-19) were too short and built too light.

The redesign boats were longer with a stronger hull became the next class, the PT20. These were the first regular production Elco boats, 77-feet long and could accommodate current design 18-inch torpedoes. The US Navy ordered these boats, numbered PT20-44. Some of these boats were the first to be used in the Pacific in WWII.

As production of the Elco 77-foot PT boats progressed, changes in design created something like subclasses within the PT-20-68 numbered boats. Boats referred to in this report, PT59, 60, and 61 were actually in the PT-48 class. Changes were both cosmetic and functional, plus additional for strength. Most of the changes within the PT20-68 boats are not recognizable to the untrained eye.

Starting at PT-69 PT boats were supplied by different manufactures, Huckins, Higgins, and Elco supplied most of the PT boats. (A few were built by other companies using British design.) These boats ranged from 70 to 80-feet long.

Most U.S. built boats were built for the U.S. Navy, but some went to Britain and Russia. There was no single class of PT Boats. Some were unique and some had a number of the same types, too many to list here. Note that all of the PT Boats used the Packard Marine engines. As time progressed these engines became more powerful.

The PT-48 class PT Boat

Although the PT-48 class boats were based on the same design as the PT-20, a number of distinctive changes and advances were made. Perhaps the easiest way to see the difference between the PT-20 and the PT-48 is the "boot" on the front of the superstructure for the PT-20 type boats is gone from the PT-48 types. Ten of these boats (PT-48, PT-59 through 68) went to the US Navy for use in the Pacific. The remainder of this class went to Britain for war in Europe.

Building PT-59, 60, & 61

As with other PT Boats, plans changed as the need for different types of boats was developed. When these three were planned the U.S. our involvement in the war was half a year away.

PT-59 was planned as Motor Boat Submarine Chaser PTC-27. In June 1941 it was reclassified PT-59. Anticipating delivery to Britain, it was reclassified as BPT-11 prior to completion. It was launched on October 8, 1941 and completed on March 5, 1942. .

PT-60 was planned as Motor Boat Submarine Chaser PTC-28. In June 1941 it was reclassified PT-60. Anticipating delivery to Britain, it was reclassified as BPT-12 prior to completion. It was launched on October 11, 1941 and completed on February 25, 1942.

PT-61 was planned as Motor Boat Submarine Chaser PTC-29. In June 1941 it was reclassified PT-61. Anticipating delivery to Britain, it was reclassified as BPT-13 prior to completion. It was launched on October 15, 1941 and completed on February 19, 1942.

These boats were built by the Electric Launch Company (“Elco”) in their Elco Naval Division in Bayonne, New Jersey. The US Government cost was about \$302,100 each. As built, these PT boats displaced (weight) 40 tons. They were 77-feet long with a beam of 19' 11" and a draft of 4' 6" and were powered by three Packard 1,200 HP V-12 4M-2500 marine engines. Their speed was rated at 41 knots (47 MPH). The crew number was 15.

First Assignment

PT-59, 60, and went directly to training squadron PTRon 4 (Patrol Torpedo Squadron 4), based at the MTB (Motor Torpedo Boat) Squadron’s Training Center, Melville, R.I.

All three were armed with the following as: Two twin .50 cal. Browning M2 machine guns in turrets; Two 21" Mk VII torpedoes mounted in tubes; One 20mm Orlikon rapid firing cannon; Eight anti-submarine depth charges.



Pacific Deployment

PT Boats that were sent to the Pacific got there several ways. All these boats had to get to the Panama Canal first.

Some PT Boats were put on board freighters or tankers and transported on the decks of those ships (*photo, right*). The Elco built boats PT-59, 60, and 61 (and some others) traveled from Connecticut down the east US coast in the Intercostal Waterway then to the Panama Canal under their own power. Other Elco boats traveled the same way from New Jersey. Higgins boats were built in New Orleans, Louisiana. Huckins boats were built in Jacksonville, Florida.



On the Pacific side of the canal there was an area used for both training as well as defense of the Panama Canal's Pacific entrance. To get across the Pacific Ocean, all PT Boats had to be shipped on board freighters or tankers for the long trip to the Pacific War Zone.

PT-59, 60, and 61 were shipped to the Pacific, then on to MTB (RON 2) on May 7, 1942. The boats were subsequently transferred to MTB RON 3(2) at the Solomon Islands on July 27, 1942.



Some information on the PT-61 shows that it arrived in Noumea (New Caledonia) on October 13, 1942. That same day it was hoisted aboard skids on the liberty ship SS *Joseph Stanton*. By October 20 was transported by the USS *Trevor* (an old four-stack destroyer re-classified as a high speed minesweeper in 1940) bound for Espiritu

Santo. The next day the PT-61 continued under to Tulagi.

On February 2 the PT-61 rescued six men out of water six miles East of Savo Island. The PT Boats in RON 3(2) were active in the Solomon's campaign, engaging in many strenuous night actions with the Tokyo Express in the defense of Guadalcanal.

On November 8 & 9, 1942 mission, PT-37, PT-39, & PT-61 went up against three Japanese destroyers. PT-39 fired two torpedoes which missed. PT-37 fired three with one striking but not exploding. PT-61 could not fire as PT-37 was in the way. The destroyers turned on their searchlights and began shelling the PT's heavily, with one 4.7-inch shell from Mochizuki striking PT-61 forward, blowing off her bow (*photo, right*). The boats escaped behind a smoke screen, and PT-61 was able to return to Tulagi safely by moving at a high speed to keep her bow above water.



After several weeks of patrols, the PT-61 was run aground on December 11, towed off the next day and was out of commission from December 13, 1942 until January 30, 1943.

It should be noted here that many PT Boats records are missing, never completed, or incomplete. There are a significant amount of dates that this report writer has not been able to find records on.

U.S. Gunboats in the Pacific

As the war progressed, the role of the PT boats changed. More U.S. aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers, destroyers and airpower were now in the western Pacific. U.S. airpower also increased.

(*Japanese destroyer, photo, right*) As



such, the Japanese changed the way they re-supplied their forward bases in the southwest Pacific. Instead of using large supply ships that were vulnerable to the U.S. naval power, they used motorized and well armed barges (*photo, right*) and ran them at night. This became know as the “Tokyo Express.”



The new role was to attack and destroy the “Tokyo Express.” (PT Boats also protected the U.S. landing craft during operations as well as rescuing downed pilots and delivering “observers” to many islands. They even evacuated U.S. troops from islands.)



At first the Navy tried using submarine chasers and landing craft (*LCI gunboat, photo, right*) by re-arming them. This was not successful for PT boat operations as these boats were much slower than the regular PT Boats they had to travel with. (PT Boats would run in together packs.)

Japanese supply craft (armed motorized barges) ran close to the shore line under the protection of the land based heavy guns. So the object of the attacking boats (PT Boats and Gunboats) was to get in quickly, surprise the enemy, destroy them, and get out quickly.

In March 1943 PT-59 was moved forward to the Russell Islands. In the fall of 1943 David M. Levy returned to the United States to be succeeded by LTJG John F. "Jack" Kennedy as commanding officer of PT-59. Kennedy was given this command when he chose to stay and fight in the Pacific Theater (PTO) after his first command, the PT-109, was rammed and sunk.

Selected PT Boats Converted into Gunboats

It became obvious that the only boats that could keep up with the PT Boats were other PT Boats. A decision was made in MTB RON 3(2) to convert the three older PT Boats to be Gunboats. The newer PT Boats in this squadron were the newer Elco 80-footers. PT-59, PT-60, and PT-61 were the older Elco 77-foot boats. They had been around and were well worn, and their torpedo mounts were for the old style torpedoes. This was a quick solution to heavy armed PT Boats as newer boats under construction in the U.S. were being built with more armament.

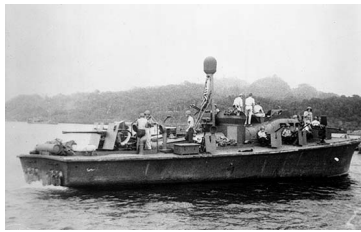


In October 1943 PT-59, PT-60, and PT-61 were converted to gunboats at Purvis Bay in the Solomon Islands. The navy sub tender U.S.S. *Argonne* (AG 31) was there and its crew worked on modifying the three PT boats using the tender’s metal working shops. All three boats had the aft 20mm Orlikon guns, the two torpedo tubes, and the racks for the eight depth charges removed. The two turret-mounted dual 50 cal. Browning machine guns remained in place. New “SO” type radar and mast was added as well as armor plating for the charthouse and other vital areas. All three boats received two (one forward and one aft) modified U.S. Army 40mm Bofors M1 anti-aircraft field guns (*photo, right*).



As the small arms varied from the three boats, the following shows the specific armament added for to each of these PT boats:

PT-59. There is some conflict exactly what the 59 boat (photo, right) received. One version states it received



‘two (one per side) dual 50 cal. Browning machine guns mounted near the chart house, and six (3 per side) single 50 cal. Browning machine guns mounted spaced along each side.’



cond version states that the 59 boat ‘was given two 40-mm anti-aircraft guns, .30 and .50-caliber machine guns behind shields.’



It looks like the second version is possibly correct when looking at the photos of the PT-59. Work on the 59 boat was completed on October 6, 1943 and moved to Rendova on October 8.

Kennedy set up some of the shields for live fire tests and it was found they could be breached at short range with .30 and .50-caliber machine guns at a frontal angle.

PT-60 and 61. Six (three per side) dual 50 cal. Browning machine guns mounted starting near the chart house, heading aft spaced along each side. Work on

both the 60 & 61 boats was completed in late October 1943.



Ken Prescott, who once commanded the PT-61, did not like the idea of modifying the Elco 77 foot boats said “the beauty of the PT boat was their maneuverability...” When the PT Gunboats returned to Tulagi, Lt.

Prescott was invited to come aboard the PT-61 “for a trail run around the bay” and that his ride “confirmed my [his] uneasiness.” He also wished the PT-61 was left in its true state. (The additional weight created by the gunboat



conversion had noticeably changed the performance of the boat.)



In 1944 several other PT Boats of the Higgins 78-foot class (PT-222, 282, 283, 284, 285) were also converted into Gunboats.

Back to the Pacific War as Gunboats

By the end of October 1943, all three PT Gunboats were back in action with their squadron. As information on each of these three gunboats has been difficult to find, the



history will be divided into each gunboat by number.

PT-59 (gunboat)

With the refitting of PT-59 completed, J. F. Kennedy took his boat to the PT Boat base at Lambu Lambu Cove on Vella Lavella Island.

When PT-59 arrived on October 18, it was sent out on patrol with two other PT boats across the New Georgia Sound to the northwestern tip of Choiseul Bay on Choiseul Island, an important Japanese barge base. The PT boats were ordered to block the western and southern approaches to Choiseul Bay and intercept barges. At this point the Japanese were frantically moving troops by barge in anticipation of American landings in the northern Solomons. Kennedy, now promoted to full lieutenant, took PT-59 on eight similar patrols during the next ten nights.

The following incident was actually portrayed in the Hollywood film "PT-109," but it was actually the PT-59 that helped evacuate these 40 to 50 Marines, not the PT-109.

On November 2, 1943, Lt. Berndtson had five PT Boats in his squadron at Lambu Lambu Cove. A message from Colonel Krulak requesting help to evacuate marines at Choiseul Island came in during the mid-afternoon. Only two boats were ready (two were already assigned and one was in repair). PT-59 had only about a one-third tank of fuel, but both Berndtson and Kennedy agreed on the rescue mission to Choiseul Island. The plan was that PT-59 would rescue the marines and the other PT-236 would tow it back to the base. The Marines were part of Lt. Col. Victor H. Krulak's Second Marine Parachute Battalion. They had been surrounded by Japanese forces, and needed to be evacuated.

The PT-59 had to proceed at full speed (using up valuable fuel) to find a guide boat that had been waiting on the northeast coast of Choiseul before dark. They missed the guide boat on the first pass as the guide boat had engine problems. Two small landing crafts (LCP) had originally sent to rescue the marines

but one loaded with Marines began to sink. The marines were under increasing Japanese fire when the two PT boats came out of the dark. PT-236 stood by providing covering fire as Kennedy moved the PT-59 between the sinking LCP and the shore. They began to load the Marines aboard the PT-59.

More than fifty-nine Marines crowded the deck of the PT-59 as the overloaded boat struggled to make its way against a storm. The engines overheated and after 2130 (11:30 PM) the two PT boats arrived safely at Voza. The PT-59 did not run out of fuel while on the mission, but was towed back to the PT Boat base after the Marines were offloaded.

This mission was successful although one of the wounded Marines died in Kennedy's bunk aboard PT-59.

On the night of November 5, Kennedy led three PT boats to Moli Point and Choiseul Bay, where they attacked Japanese barges. During the next week and a half, PT-59 would prowl off Choiseul Bay looking for barges.

Kennedy's final action was on the night of November 16, when he took PT-59 on an uneventful patrol. On November 18, a doctor directed Kennedy—who was mentally and physically exhausted and had lost 25 pounds over the preceding three months—to go the hospital at Tulagi.

Kennedy gave up his command of PT-59 that day and left the Solomon Islands on December 21 for the United States. He left the Navy on physical disability in March of 1945. Soon, he would begin his career in Congress. As for PT-59, she remained in the Solomon Islands until August 1944, when she was transported back to Rhode Island.

PT-60 & PT-61 (as gunboats)

Much less has been found about this period of time for the PT-60, and 61. They were returned to RON 3(2), Tulagi Harbor, British Solomon Islands under Task Force 31. On January 1, 1944 RON 3(2) listed the following boats in their squadron: PT-35, 36, 39, 40, 46, 47, 48, 59, 60, and 61.

With the few known records one stands out. On the January 11, 1944 MTB RON 3 report “The PT-61 suffered from extensive leaks caused by weather conditions severe to this type of boat. Her condition is typical of the 44’ boat, which, at two to two and one-half years of service, show the results of longitudinal weakness and hard service.”

Squadron Reports Pertaining to PT-59, 60, and 61

Some records of the squadron where PT-59, 60, 61 were assigned were found and are below. The trio did not last as gunboats very long as they were only a temporary fix to having fast heavily armed gunboat until newer boats from the U.S. arrive.

November 25, 1943 Motor Torpedo Boats PT Operations Night 24-25 November, 1943

Force: Nine PT boats on special mission to Buka Passage and Queen Creole Harbor...

Enemy Contacts: Two enemy destroyers.

Section “Tea Charlie” (station – covering western approaches to Buka Passage.

PT61 designated “TEA35” (along with PT106 and PT319) under Lt. (jg) J.G Atkinson, USNR.

2130 – underway to patrol station.

0130 – PT61 (and PT108) arrived on station.

0300 – Joined Tea Fox and departed for base.

0315 – Observed heavy gunfire on the horizon.

0615 – Arrived atBase.

January 1, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

PT61 arrived at Blanche Harbor at 0700.

Note: Squadron 3 consisted of PTs 36, 38, 39, 40, 46, 47,48, 59, 60, & 61.

January 2, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0800 - PT61 (along with PT59 and PT60) were positioned at Treasury Island B.S.I.

Note: Treasury Island is located on the shore of Stirling Island along Blanche Harbor.

January 3, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

1815 – PT61 underway on patrol off Ratta Island B.S.I.

January 4, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0700 – PT61 Arrived Blanche Harbor from patrol (no enemy contact).

0800 – Pt61 (and PT59) at Blanche Harbor, Treasury Island, B.S.I.

January 8, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0800 – [PT] 61 (and PT59) at Blanche Harbor, Treasury Island, B.S.I.

Note: PT60 was at MTB base 3, Tulagi Harbor, B.S.I.

January 9, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0800 – PT61 at Blanche Harbor, Treasury Island, B.S.I.

1930 – PT61 (and PT59) underway from Blanche Harbor to Torokina PT., Bouganville Island.

January 10, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0630 – PT61 (and PT59) arrived Torokina Island.

1630 - PT61 (and PT59) underway on patrol off Buka Island.

January 11, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0645 PT61 (and PT59) arrive Torokina Pt. from patrol (no enemy contact).

“The PT61 suffered from extensive leaks caused by weather conditions severe to this kind of boat. Her condition is typical of the 77’ boat, which, at two to two and one-half years of service, show the results of longitudinal weakness and hard service.

January 12, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

1215 – PT61 departed Torokina Pt., Bouganville Island, for Blanche Harbor, Treasury Island.
1650 – PT61 arrived at Blanche Harbor.

January 13, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0650 – PT61 departed Blanche Harbor, for Motor Torpedon Boat Base ELEVEN, Rendover Harbor.
1435 – PT61 arrived Motor Torpedon Boat Base ELEVEN, Rendover Harbor.

January 14, 1943 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0800 – (boat positions) PT61 (and PT59) under repair at Motor Torpedon Boat Base ELEVEN, Rendover Harbor, New Georgia Group, B.S.I.

January 26, 1944 (MTB Squadron 3 Daily War Dairy)

0800 - (boat positions) PT61 (and PT59, PT60) at Motor Torpedon Boat Base ELEVEN, Rendover Harbor, New Georgia Group, B.S.I. PT61 (and PT59) under repair.
0830 – PT61 departed Rendover Harbor for Tulagi Harbor.
1505 – PT61 arrived Motor Torpedo Base THREE, Tulagi Harbor, B.S.I.

The End of the Trio

The three Elco 77 gunboat conversions did not last long. The war with Japan was winding down due to the significant losses by Japan. Newer PT boats with heavier armament were delivered to the squadrons. Their fate is as follows:

PT-59 along with five other Elco 77-footers were transferred stateside to the MTB Squadron's Training Center (Melville) on August 7, 1944 for repair training and reclassified as Small Boat on October 14, 1944. On December 15, 1944 the PT-59 (now numbered C-102584) was used briefly as an Air Sea Rescue (ASR) boat at Naval Air Station Norfolk, then as a

test subject for dehydration tests at the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

The 59 was listed as "Surplused" on 3/21/47. sold to Mr. Gus Marinak of Bronx, NY and named "Sun Tan." Later, sold to Mr. Donald K. Schmahl of Bronx, New York, NY who renamed the vessel "Sea Queen V". Through a mix up in paper work, the famous PT-59 was thought to be the former PT-95, a 78 foot Huckins PT Boat which a very different design with no significant wartime history ("training only"), hence no immediate efforts were made to save this famous vessel. The boat was converted into the fishing vessel "Sea Queen V."

When the actual identity of this boat was discovered, James "Boat" Newberry, founder of PT Boats Inc., attempted to obtain the boat. However, the boat's ownership was tangled up in NYC probate court. Somehow a fire occurred, and the boat eventually sunk at its mooring (photo, right), beside the 207th St. Bridge over the Harlem River around 1976. This is in Inwood's North Cove next to the NYC transit rail yard. The hull sat there for years and slowly fell apart and rotted away. What was left was eventually removed and she has since been declared destroyed by the U.S. Coast Guard.



PT-60 was stricken from the register on April 21, 1944 (obsolete). No further records have been found.

PT-61 was transferred stateside and reclassified as a Small Boat No. C-68371 on February 16, 1944. On February 18, 1944, LT. Teigan delivered the boat to

Commander, Naval Base New Georgia (the Western Province of the Solomon Islands, located northwest of Guadalcanal). The C- 68731 (*photo, below*) was transferred to Standard Landing Craft Unit 14. All arms but the two machine guns in the turrets were removed. ASR boat VIP Transport hack. Her Nickname at this time was "Sea Biscuit".

Last info on the ex-PT 61 is it went to "Green Island" (Australia?). No further records have been found.



Photos – Drawings

Photos and drawings here also include photos other boats (non-gunboats) of the same class to show views of this class of PT Boats.

