

# PT Boats Raid Bongao Island



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In spring 1945, as Allied forces prepared to advance from the Philippines to Borneo, PT boats were given the dangerous task of leading reconnaissance missions against Japanese-held islands. The author tells his own story as a young PT boat commander in the waning day of the War in the Pacific.

In March 1945, when I was commanding officer of the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron 24, I led a daylight strike against the Japanese naval base at Bongao Island with the support of Marine corsair fighter air cover. On board one of the four boats we had an Arm Photographer who took pictures of the action. To my knowledge, there are some of the only pictures taken of PT boats under fire in the Pacific Theater during the war.

Bongao is part of the Tawi Tawi island group that lies about 30 miles north of Borneo. This area was used as an anchorage by the old U.S. Asiatic Fleet, and the Japanese Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa's carrier strike force departed from here on its way to fight at the Battle of the Philippine Sea. The Army was planning to land

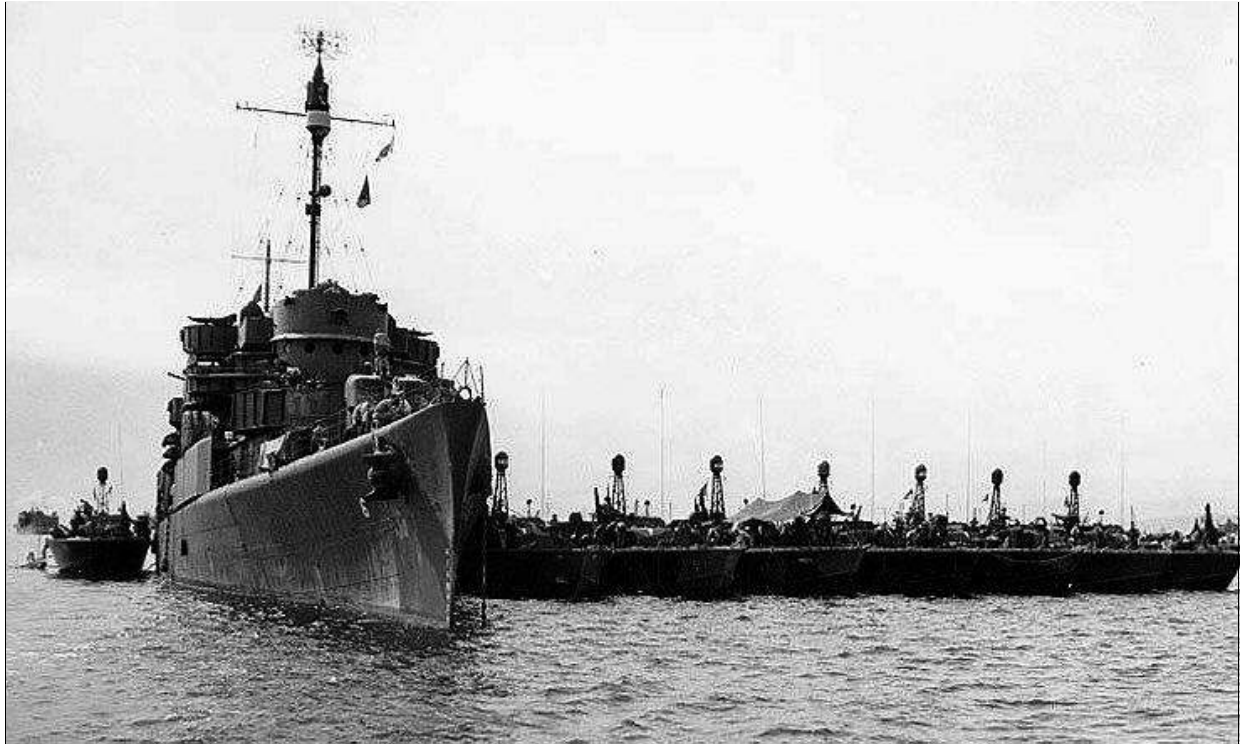


on Bongao as a prelude to a future landing on Borneo. The Army asked the Navy for a reconnaissance, and PT boats were chosen as they were heavily armed, small, fast,



maneuverable, and could get in close to the beach. Most of the time in the Pacific PTs were used as gunboats. They made close-aboard and devastating nighttime attacks against armed barges carrying troops and supplies.

I spent four years at sea; two years on a destroyer, and after wrangling a transfer (which was not easy), I volunteered for PT duty and spent the rest of the war in them. PT service gave a junior officer more responsibility and a chance at command. At the time of the Bongao mission, my squadron and Squadron 8 were operating from a base located on Malamaui Island 12 miles south of Zamboanga, the principal town of southwestern Mindanao in the Philippines. We had arrived in the area on 8 March as a part of Amphibious Group under the command of Rear Admiral Forest Royal, and were serviced by a converted PBY tender, the USS *Oyster Bay* (AGP-6), that provided food, ammunition, fuel, and repairs. Admiral Royal ordered bombing attacks by Marine Air Groups 12, 14, and 32, and shore bombardment by the cruisers USS *Boise* (CL-47) and USS *Phoenix* (CL-44), screened by six destroyers. On 10 March a large part of the 41<sup>st</sup> Division landed near Zamboanga, which was held by about 8,000 Japanese.



*USS Oyster Bay AGP-6 anchored in Leyte Gulf Dec. 1944 with PT boats along side.*

Our job before the landing and after was to patrol by night and day, and destroy any suicide craft, barges, or luggers that could menace the amphibious force. We prowled around the beaches of Mindanao and the shores of Malamaui and Basilan Islands, and destroyed many small craft. Because enemy air activity in the Philippines was non-existent, we began to make more and more daylight patrols, and combined PT strikes and cover from Marine F4U Corsair fighters, and twin-engines B-25 bombers.



*B25 twin-engine bomber*



*F4U Corsair fighters*

On the day of the landing at Zamboanga, I was ordered to destroy gun emplacements and all small craft in the



town of Isabella on Basilan Island with the help of fighters and bombers. The Army wanted to land troops, and the town had to be cleaned out. We had been shot at the day before, and knew where some of the guns were. Intelligence advised us there were 100 Japanese in Isabella.

The day dawned bright and clear, and the sky was blue to infinity. After a great breakfast of Spam and powdered eggs on *Oyster Bay*, I climbed down and jumped on board the lead boat that was nested alongside the tender, gathered the two boat captains and executive officers around me, and we planned the mission together. The three 1,500-horsepower engines were throbbing with mufflers closed, and the crew - all in their 20s or less - were flaking lines, wiping off guns, and filling ammo boxes. The air was velvety with tropical heat, and we were in shorts with no shirts.

When all was ready, we peeled away from the tender, opened the mufflers, and thundered off at 30 knots. At Basilan, we rendezvoused with seven B-25s and six F4Us. The planes were under our control and could not bomb or strafe without orders from us, because we were on the deck moving more slowly, and could spot targets more easily with binoculars. We also could more accurately report damage to targets. I called the senior pilot - who probably was a major - and discussed our mission. I have forgotten his call sign, but mine was Toddy Leader. I never did find out who gave me that wacky call sign.

Basilan and nearby Malamaui were beautiful islands that were low lying, covered with tropical vegetation, and surrounded by reefs and clear turquoise water. At the entrance to the channel between Malamaui and Basilan, and 1,000 yards from Isabella, I spotted a 50-foot PT-type vessel, a clinker-built launch, and a rakish boat in a cradle about 300 yards away. They were tied to a dock and partially hidden by undergrowth and overhanging trees. Forty rounds of 40-mm fired from our boat tore them apart and started fires. A few moments later, we passed the small dock and proceeded at ten knots toward the main dock. As the boat captains brought the two PTs broadside to the piers, we heard the distant chatter of machine guns and saw bullets tear the water 50 yards away. The Marine leader called to say he saw tracer fire and smoke coming from a knoll in the middle of Isabella. I turned him loose to bomb and strafe because the pilots could see us clearly.



The attack on the town of Isabella on Basilan Island proved the effectiveness of PT boat/aircraft reconnaissance teams. The slower moving PT boats helped Marine fighters and Army bombers find their targets and suppress enemy positions.

From then on it was chaos. Two bombers went in on the knoll, released a bomb apiece, and we heard them report intense return fire. Corsair fighters slid down with the sun glinting off the wings and laid down a carpet of fire. We put aside caution, closed with the beach, and opened up with 16 guns. We blew out the sides of buildings, shot down sheds, and tore up the general area. I lost track of return fire because of the blast of bombs and the roar of our guns. I saw a few mortar geysers, but we were not getting hit, so we hung in with the Marines. The bombers came in at tree-top level, and released their

bombs - some of which bounced higher than the planes. They had delayed-action fuses, and when they detonated we felt the blast on the bottom of the boats 300 yards away. Ashore, fuel and ammo were exploding and fires were blazing in a dozen places. The Marine pilots were superb - they would fly down a gun barrel. With them over us, to quote Louis L'Amour, "we would approach hell with one bucket of water,"

After about half an hour, it was all over. Half of Isabella was gone. We heard later that the civilians had left, and the only Japanese there were the ones on the guns. The Army later found a few who were still alive. The rest, I guess, disappeared in the firefight. We spent the rest of the day cruising around the island and destroyed a few more craft. We had no casualties and none of the boats were hit.

When the landing operation was over, Admiral Royal said that, "The immense success of Motor Torpedo Boat-Plane patrol teams was clearly illustrated during the operation. The fine cooperation that was accomplished, resulted in the destruction of many prime targets, inland, and along the beaches, especially the destruction of small surface craft, and contributed to making this operation free from suicide boat attacks.

A few days later, a singular event occurred. We had planned to put a PT base ashore on Caldera Point, seven miles east of the Army landing at Zamboanga. This would make us independent of the tender and give us more services. At 1700 on 16 March, the entire base was ashore: torpedoes, food, ammunition, tents, medical supplies, spare parts, etc. A crane barge, fuel barge, and engine repair barge were anchored in a cove nearby. They had been towed from our main base up north. Lieutenant Robert Williamson and I were chatting and leaning over the rail of the *Oyster Bay*. There were about 40 SeaBees ashore who were preparing to build the base. Four PT boats were nested on each side of the tender.

Suddenly, the entire area was taken under fire by 75-mm guns and heavy mortars. Shells were exploding amongst the supplies and water geysers were rising around the anchored barges. Williamson and I looked at each other and took off. Whatever was done, had to be done fast. We each took a boat and headed ashore to rescue the SeaBees. We ordered the rest of the boats offshore, because at the moment, no one knew from where the fire was coming. The *Oyster Bay* moved offshore, and the skipper called the command ship a few miles away and requested fire support. The water was deep right up to the shore - so Williamson and I put the PT boats on the beach, and the SeaBees streamed on board with mortar fire bursting all around us. We backed out to safety, and the entire rescue did not take more than ten minutes. A Fletcher (DD-445)-class destroyer located the mortar and gun battery and blew it away. We only had two casualties, but we lost one-third of the base and the crane barge. The next day the base was reloaded and later put ashore on Malamaui Island. I still wonder how a senior planner of my beloved Navy could have approved putting ashore an undefended PT base seven miles from an Army landing perimeter, while the enemy still held the territory.

About ten days later, I was called on board the command ship to discuss the reconnaissance mission requested by the Army for Bongao Island. A recon mission in daylight sounded like an order to go in and get your ass shot off. In point of fact it was, but there was more to it than just that. If we exposed ourselves to shore fire, we could locate their shore batteries, and then they could be bombed before a landing.

As we discussed the mission, it was suggested that I reconnoiter and maybe work my way into the inner harbor to destroy small craft and other targets of opportunity. However, as the Navy looks after its own, and as this was a former Japanese fleet anchorage, I was told to back

off if necessary and not try to conquer Bongao single-handed. Then the staff told me they had located an informed guerrilla fighter to guide us through the minefields. This was interesting information, and I remember hoping he had a photographic memory. The Army was sending along a photographer to take pictures of the beaches and general layout. An intelligence officer then ended the discussion with the news that Bongao was held by Imperial Japanese Marines. I felt complimented by this choice bit of information that we would not have to waste our times with Japan's second team.

I decided to take four boats for additional firepower. It was against squadron policy, because they were few in number, but I also took along a pharmacist's mate. Bongao was two hundred miles away, and I expected trouble. We cruised down the west side of the Sulu Archipelago through the Celebes Sea, and we arrived off the island in the late morning after an 11-hour transit. My instructions to the boat officers the day before had been that I intended to close with the beach to 1,000 yards, come left, run parallel, increase speed to 30 knots, and the lead boat would fire five rounds into the beach with our 40-mm gun. I wanted to hear as well as see return fire - you cannot hear anything with 32 guns firing from four boats. I also instructed Ensign "Zig Zag" Zoeller, skipper of the last boat in the column, to lay smoke if we were taken under heavy fire. Finally, I told everyone to open fire with all guns, if the Japanese began to shoot.

At 1130, four Marine Corsairs appeared overhead, and I talked to their leader. He agreed to go in and bomb and strafe when we paralleled the shore. We then came in to about three miles from Bongao and reduced speed. As I had suspected, the guerrilla pilot could not locate any entrance, and we soon had mines on both sides of our boats. Attached to cables, they were starkly visible in the clear water. It was encouraging to note they lay deeper than the five and a half feet that we drew, so none of us blew up.



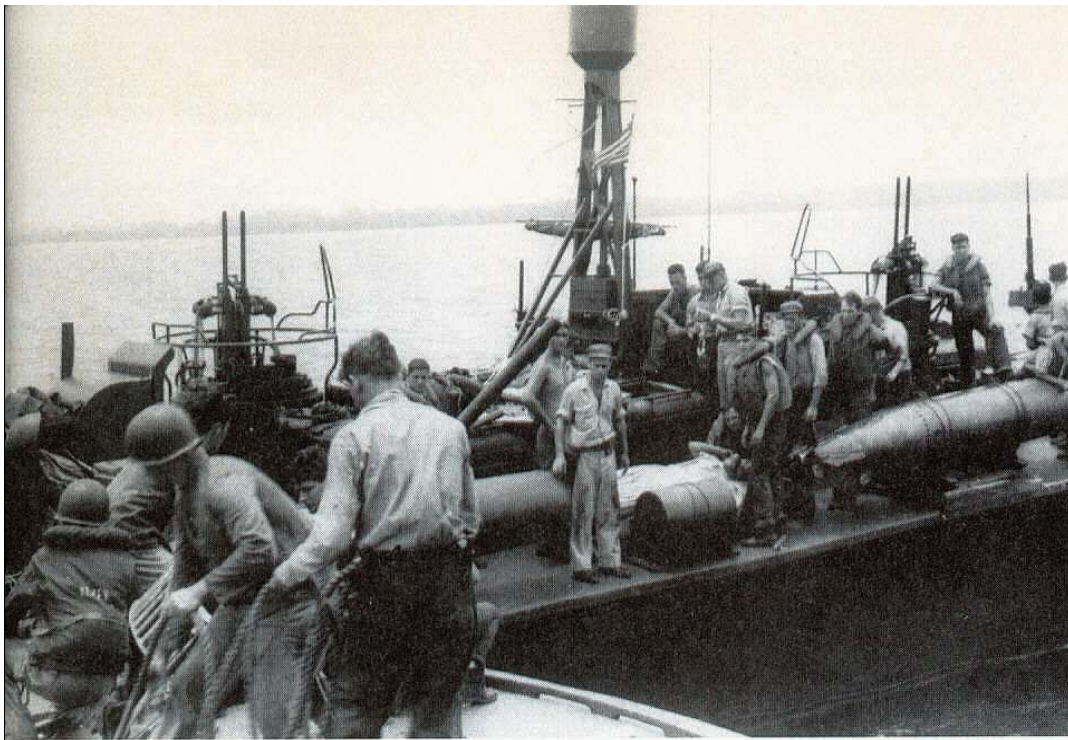
Once clear we turned out attention to Bongao, which was a formidable-looking island rising up from the sea. As we came closer, even with binoculars I saw nothing but a solid wall of green jungle. I knew the enemy would not shoot until they figured we had reached the limit of our advance. On our first pass, I had no intention of giving the Japanese a point-blank opportunity, so when we were about a half-mile away we came left, paralleled the shore, and increased speed to 30 knots. I ordered the boat captain, Ensign Thompson, to open fire with the 40-mm. Five rounds went in and 20 rounds came back at us. The Japanese had guns dug in all over the hillside, and they appeared to be 37-mm or larger. We then turned loose continuous, automatic fire from 32 guns. There were now splashes over us, in front of us, and between us. Our fire swept all over the hillside and did no apparent damage. It was like firing into a great sponge, and there was no point to aim at, as the enemy was well hidden.

The shore fire increased, the shells closed in, and the *PT-335*, the second boat in column, took a 75-mm shell through the starboard gas tank. The boat did not blow up, as the gas tank was full (it takes gas fumes for an explosion). A moment later, the starboard .50-caliber turret gunner of the same boat was hit in the neck with shrapnel from a bursting shell. I saw the four Corsairs hurtle down and heard the thunder of their bombs. Next, "Zig Zag" Zoeller came

roaring by, laying a magnificent wall of dense white smoke that towered 100 feet over the water. He helped save us from further damage. The shells still came through, but with less accuracy. The pilots reported intense, accurate return fire.

I then ordered a retirement, as there was nothing to be gained by staying except to lose the boats and more of my men. We ran offshore with the wall of smoke between us and Bongao, and soon we were beyond the shore batteries. I sent Marines home; there was no need to put them at further risk. Had there been U.S. troops on the beach in need of our help, our tactics would have been different. This was a reconnaissance mission, and we had found out what we came there to learn. The island was loaded with guns.

We lay offshore, and the *PT-335* secured her engines as the bilges were full of gas. My boat took her in tow and proceeded to New Batubatu on Tawi Tawi Island, where we had been ordered to unload some ammunition for the guerrillas, and where I hoped to find a doctor for the wounded gunner. He had been hit in the carotid artery and the pharmacist's mate did not have enough equipment to save him. There was no doctor there, and sadly the gunner died two hours



Despite heavy fire from Japanese gun positions on Bongao, only one crewman in the squadron was wounded. The wounded gunner, lying on the stretcher, center, died a few hours after this picture was taken.

later. We planned and carried out the best burial ceremony we could for our shipmate. He was laid to rest in a pretty cemetery in Zamboanga. I still often think of him.

Despite the amount of return fire, the reason we did not have more damage to the boats and more casualties was the fact that we were small, fast, hard to hit, and we had an interval of eight boat lengths between each of us. Had any of the Japanese been duck hunters, they would have been able to take a more accurate lead on us blazing along at 30 knots.

We towed the damaged boat back through a night of thunderstorms and torrential rain. Two days later Tokyo Rose report the destruction of a PT boat at Bongao Island. After I turned in my report to the Navy, Army bombers pounded the island for several days. When the troops landed, they found the Imperial Marines had pulled out for Borneo. We felt very satisfied. Our mission had not just saved some of our soldiers from being casualties, it had saved them all.

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