

# Swift Current

The official publication of the  
Swift Boat Sailors Association

**Malta Boat 2012**

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## A Forty-Six Year Old Legend!

By Wilfred Sultana

The Vietnam War ran for nearly twenty years – 1st November 1955 to the fall of Saigon on 30th April 1975 with U.S. military involvement ending on 15th August 1973. A war, the like of all miserable conflicts, which also served to instigate research, development and manufacture of new weapons and the strengthening of existing arsenals – a true case where difficult situations inspire ingenious solutions.

In such an environment on 1st February 1965 a US Naval Advisory Group, the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, came out with a report entitled the "Naval Craft Requirements in a Counter Insurgency Environment," where the PCF project was conceived.

The report emphasised that no intensive effort has been made to develop a COIN (Counter Insurgency) craft specifically suited to perform the many missions needed to combat insurgent activities – Actually the US Navy did not care about small, shallow draft patrol craft before, and were caught short. Yet by June of that year ARPA, a government research unit, discovered that a crew boat used to support the off-shore oil drilling rigs in the Gulf of Mexico had most fitting characteristics to the required vessel, with three of the main requisites being: 1. Reliable and sturdy; 2. Non-wooden hull, with screw and rudder protection against groundings; 3. Self-sufficient for 400-500 mile patrol. An immediate visit by a team of experts to boat builders, Sewart Seacraft in Berwick, Louisiana led to the Navy buying then and there the rights to the drawings for the "swift boat".

The Navy Bureau of Ships eventually had demanded more than fifty military modifications to the commercial design yet in spite of all these changes, the first four boats were delivered to the U.S. Navy in a mere forty days span. The overall Swift Boats order list was made up of 104 'Mark I' model (1965), 46 'Mark II' model (1967) with a modified deck house set further back from the bow, and 33 'Mark IIIs' (1969-1972) which were a larger version of the 'Mark IIs'.

The first group of Patrol Craft Fast (PCFs), also known as Swift Boats, arrived in Vietnam in October of 1965 and initially were used as coastal patrol craft, but their shallow draft and low freeboard limited their seaworthiness in open waters. These limitations plus the difficulties the smaller, lighter armed Patrol Boat River (also known as Pibber or PBRs) were facing in the interior led to the inclusion of Swift Boats to patrol the interior Vietnamese waterways made up of some 1,500 miles. Approximately 3,500 men served as crew or as support personal on Swift Boats from 1965 to 1973.

Although in all 193 PCFs were built, only about 110 served in Vietnam and the two training bases in California; with remaining PCFs being sold or given to nations friendly to the United States.

# The Malta Connection

One of these friendly nations to the United States was Malta.

In fact on January 16, 1971, PCFs 813 and 816 (both Mark II PCFs), were loaded aboard the USS Wood County LST-1178 at Little Creek, Virginia, departing three days later for Malta. The Wood County arrived in Valletta's Grand Harbour on February 6, 1971 and discharged the two Swiftboats now referred to as C-6823 (PCF 813) and C-6824 (PCF 816). Their designations were changed to C23 and C24 on April 5, 1971 during the official handover ceremony to the Armed Forces of Malta by the then US Ambassador to Malta, Mr. J C Pritzlaff. Patrol craft forenames C23 and C24 were later changed to P23 and P24. The Maritime Troop, today known as the Maritime Squadron, of the Malta Land Force was established in November 1970 and the ex-U.S. 'Swift Class' Patrol Craft were the first boats of the Squadron's fleet and operation.

This was 40 years ago where initially the Swift Boats were used in an anti-contraband role, and served to improve co-ordination on marine related duties with the Police Force, Customs Authorities and Fisheries Department. Due to the small size of Malta, the role of the Maritime Squadron and of its vessels hardly changed. Here the duties are vast and comprise of an amalgamated coast guard, customs, marine police, fisheries protection and search and rescue unit. Naturally the volume of operations has increased dramatically throughout the years and since Malta's entry into the European Union on April 1, 2004 the volume of operations continued to surge in matters related to fisheries, border control and ship safety in particular.

Proudly and diligently the tough little Swift boats have been well taken care of by the AFM Maritime Squadron's seamen, as these directly experienced Malta's diverse maritime related existence right the way through from 5th April 1971 to 18th April 2010 when P23 and P24 were decommissioned – 39 solid years of remarkable service.

The lifespan of a boat is similar to that of a human - made up of bright and pleasant episodes as well as of dark and sorrowful incidents. Naturally all onboard happenings of whatever sort are shared and experienced by the crew that sail and live aboard. It is recorded that fifty US navy Swift Boats sailors lost their life and over 350 were wounded in the line of duty. Unfortunately a dark and sorrowful incident is also linked with the Swift Boats bond with the Armed Forces of Malta.

Friday 7 September 1984 is considered the worst tragic day suffered by Maltese services personnel - the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM) and the Malta Police Corps – in peace-time. Swift Boat P23 was on a routine operation carrying a number of illegal fireworks intended to be dumped into the sea when, some two miles off Qala Point in Gozo, this exploded on the deck killing five army personnel crew members and two policemen. The sole survivor, despite being badly injured, managed to beach the craft on Comino. After the incident, the patrol boat was towed for repairs at the Manoel

Island Yacht Yard where after having its bow rebuilt it was soon after re-assigned to duty with the Squadron.

On being decommissioned P23 has become a precious and proud monument, on hard at Haywharf, Floriana, a testimony to perceive her history and to be a constant tribute to Swift Boat sailors who have served and yes, died in the line of duty.

# Back to the USA

The AFM's link with the US Navy's Vietnam veterans' of the Swift Boat Sailors' Association (SBSA) owes much to the efforts of Bob 'Axelrod' Shirley, who between 1967 and 1968 during the Vietnam War was in charge of Swift-boat PCF-45 in the Cam Ranh Bay and Chu Lai areas. He was a great friend and supporter of the AFM's Maritime Squadron, and their Swift-class patrol boat crews. He established this link through the then HQ 2nd Regiment AFM's adjutant and public relations' officer, Captain Ivan M. Consiglio, and together they were both instrumental for several activities for interaction between the ex-USN Swift Boat sailors of the SBSA and their AFM counterparts in Malta, which along the way consequently gave genesis to the idea of having one Maltese Swift PCF return to the USA for use as a memorial.

For it was during one such activity that the initial idea went floated, in March 2003 when the AFM's Maritime Squadron and the Malta Amateur Radio League (MARL) celebrated with the SBSA the activities of these Swift Boats in South East Asia and later with the AFM, through Special Event Ham Radio Station which was on the air from the Haywharf Base at the same time as another Special Event Station was operated from an SBSA annual reunion at the Sheraton Waterside Hotel in Norfolk, Virginia USA.

Commended in Vietnam by his commander for having performed above and beyond his duties, 'Axelrod' Shirley fuelled his retirement with great contributions to telling the life stories of young American navy sailors' experiences during their year's tour on board Swift boats, such as through his website <http://www.pcf45.com> . The website also chronicles tributes to the AFM's Swift Boats' service. Bob Shirley was very much actively involved in other Swift Boat veterans groups until the time of his death in January 2008.

Overseeing the completion of Bob Shirley's suggestion of P24's return to the USA is another USN Swift Boat veteran, Virgil Erwin, PCF 67's ex-skipper in Vietnam who today is an active SBSA Board Member, as well as an activist in the Vietnam Unit Memorial Monument Fund and the Admiral Hoffmann Foundation. These nowadays provide financial aid to returning wounded Iraq and Afghanistan service personnel. Erwin also authored the book 'Cat Lo' - a story about young men who volunteer for Swift Boats in Vietnam, and about war's indelible lesson for those who survive: life is too precious to waste. Amongst the number of recognitions endowed upon 'Cat Lo' was awarded the 2009 Gold Medal for memoir by the Military Writers Society of America.



Virgil Erwin first visited Malta in June 1967 when serving on board destroyer USS Fred T. Berry (DD 858) which escorted the USS Liberty into Valletta for repairs and to off load her dead after the unfortunate attack by Israeli jets. Since then he has returned to the Island three times, and has also established a number of friends locally, one of whom is artist Edwin Galea. In fact one of Galea's historical paintings is displayed in the San Diego Maritime Museum and another at the US Naval Academy.

Virgil Erwin most recent trips were related to the necessary organisation formalities to have the AFM's P24 shipped to back to the USA, for eventual display at the San Diego Maritime Museum.

“Men of all navies develop an intense affection for the ships they serve, for it is these Sweethearts that protected them from storms at sea and the violence of war. Swift Boats in Vietnam were manned by very young sailors and because they brought so many back home from brutal conditions, the bond between boat and sailor is extraordinary.

And now these sailors are leaving us at an increasing rate and they wonder who will be left to tell their story. These two Swift Boats have an opportunity to convey the remarkable achievements of these men far beyond living memory. P 24 will not rest in a cradle as a static display — she will be revitalized by old Swift Boat Sailors and race gracefully through the San Diego Bay with museum

visitors as crew, telling the story of men from Malta and America who served with honor”, recounts Virgil Erwin.

Although missing a formal decommissioning ceremony, the Maltese Swift Boats P23 and P24 will now assume a new role. A role not only meant for their display at the San Diego Maritime Museum and at AFM Maritime Squadron’s Haywharf Base. Theirs is a commendable monument meant as a tribute to a legend that happened because there were daring men who made it happen: Lest We Forget!

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### **P 24 Off the Boat and on the Trailer in Norfolk**

Route: Outa Norfolk area on US 58 West to Emporia, VA, then south on I-95 across NC to Florence, SC picking up I-20. Running on I-20 across GA, AL, MS, LA and TX, picking up I-10 West of Pecos, TX. Running I-10 outa TX across lower NM into AZ. Picking up I-8 near Casa Grande, AZ. Running I-8 on into San Diego.

## Malta Project Timeline

**May 1968:** US Navy takes ownership of PCF 816 from shipbuilder Seawart Seacraft and transfers her to the Swift Boat Training Command at the Naval Amphibious Base Coronado.

**April 1971:** The US Navy donates two Mark II Swift Boats, PCF 813 and 816 to the Maritime Squadron, Armed Forces of Malta.

**March 2003:** Swift Boat historian Bob Shirley, OinC of PCF 45, contacts Major Ivan Consiglio and the Maritime Squadron via Ham Radio during the SBSA Norfolk Reunion to celebrate the history of Swift Boats.

**June 2009:** Major Ivan Consiglio, Public Affairs Officer, Armed Forces of Malta, announced to the SBSA plans to de-commission two Swift Boats, P 23 (PCF 813) and P 24 (PCF 816), and asked if the SBSA would like to take ownership of P 24 to restore and preserve this 1968 Mark II Swift Boat.

**July 2009 – March 2010:** SBSA develops a plan to bring P 24 to the US via US Navy Lift of Convenience and communicates this to the Maritime Squadron in Malta. The Maritime Museum of San Diego offers to support and share the restoration expense. Ray Ashley presents this joint plan to the Ambassador from Malta in Washington, DC.

Dave Wallace and Virg Erwin present the plan to the Maritime Squadron in Malta with support from LCDR Phil Webb, Naval Attaché at the US Embassy. SwiftShips presents their plan to Armed Forces of Malta senior officers to create a static display for both P 23 and P 24 in exchange for new patrol boat sales. Maritime Museum of Malta presents their interest to senior government officials to restore P 24. The Maritime Squadron presents their plan to keep P 23 as a Monument to the seven men who died while serving on board P 23.

**June 2010:** All five Congressional Representatives from the San Diego area sign a joint letter to the government of Malta supporting the plan drafted by the SBSA and Maritime Museum of San Diego.

**May 2011:** SBSA Members at the San Antonio Reunion vote to accept financial support from the Maritime Museum of San Diego to restore P 24 in San Diego.

**September 2011:** Ms. Vanessa Frazier, Minister of Defense for Malta, after reviewing all plans submitted for the disposition of the two Swift Boats, sends a letter awarding P 24 to the SBSA and P 23 to the Maritime Squadron. SBSA sends a request to the US Navy 6th Fleet asking for a Lift of Convenience to transport P 24 from Malta to Norfolk.

**November 2011:** Dave Bradley, Don Farrell and Virg Erwin conduct a detailed video and written survey of P 24 and contract with SC Engineering in Malta to build a cradle for ocean transport per US Navy guidelines. SBSA pays \$5,000 for the cradle down payment.

**December 2011:** Cradle expense is \$10,000 and commercial trailer transport quotation from Norfolk to San Diego is \$15,000. Logistics and crane services will exceed \$10,000. Estimate for P 24 restoration is \$40,000.

SBSA Board of Directors make a decision to transfer ownership of P 24 to the Maritime Museum due to cost, Coast Guard registration and application for Historical status considerations. US Navy communicates plans to the US Embassy in Malta for the USS Whidbey Island to transport P 24 to Norfolk, to arrive in the Grand Harbor, Valletta, Malta on 12 January and depart 14 January.

**January 2012:** On 9 January Ray Ashley, Mark Gallant, Dave Bradley and Virg Erwin meet with Colonel David Mifsud, Armed Forces Malta, to prepare transfer of ownership documents and arrange logistics for loading P 24 onto the USS Whidbey Island. The radar mast is unbolted and secured on deck and P 24 secured in the new cradle with eight ratcheting straps rated at 2 tons each. On 12 January, Captain Grogan, USN, JAG representative for Admiral J.C. Harvey, USN, Commander US Fleet Forces, expresses regret at terminating the Lift of Convenience by the 6th Fleet due to the absence of State Department Approval for the transfer of Ownership for military equipment donated by the US Government per stipulations in the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act. The US Navy further advises they require the Department of Agriculture to inspect P 24 for potential contaminants before loading onto a US Naval ship and requires the Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to approve and issue an Import Permit for an "Implement of War."

**March 2012:** Department of State approves transfer of ownership for P 24 from the Republic of Malta to the Maritime Museum of San Diego.

**April 2012:** Department of ATF issues an Import license for an "Implement of War." SC Engineering steam-cleans the hull and engine room spaces of P 24 – two weeks full time for \$2,000 including the disposal of the waste effluent.

**May 2012:** Department of Agriculture accepts photographs of a pristine engine room as evidence that they do not need to perform an on-site inspection prior to the ocean cargo transport of P 24. Department of Home Land Security informed of pending arrival of P 24. SwiftShips provided a Certificate of Origin required by the US Coast Guard. US Customs states they are confident all documents required for US entry have been met.

**June 2012:** The US Navy announces they cannot provide a Lift of Convenience due to a law in Congress forbidding transportation support if commercial freight is available. Maritime Museum initiates a request for a Congressional waiver for US Navy support. The US Navy states one more position: "Even after you have all the documents in hand and a waiver from Congress, we cannot be seen by the US Tax payer as diverting a ship to Malta to pick up P 24 as a "Lift of Convenience." Colonel David Mifsud, Armed Forces of Malta, expresses desire for the Maritime Museum to make arrangements for the transport of P 24 as soon as possible.

**July 2012:** Assumption is made that the US Navy will never be able to offer any assistance in transporting P 24 to the

US. The Maritime Museum Board of Trustees authorizes \$42,000 for a Maersk commercial ocean transport to Norfolk, VA and \$18,000 for overland transportation to San Diego. Contract is signed with Able Boat Transport to haul P 24 from Norfolk to San Diego. Able begins requesting Department of Transportation permits for route planning through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Mark Gallant, Dave Bradley and Virg Erwin travel to Malta to present all required documents to Malta Customs: Department of State letter of approval for the donation of P 24 to the Maritime Museum, ATF Import Permit, Certificate of Origin, Department of Agriculture inspection waiver and Maersk contract. Crane services and other logistics arranged for loading P 24 onto the Maersk ship Bavaria. The top 22" of the gun turret is unbolted and removed to improve overpass clearance for trailer transport. Ceremony is held on 20 July for the official turnover of P 24 by the Armed Forces of Malta to the Maritime Museum. Coast Guard Bill of Sale for one US Dollar signed by Colonel Mifsud and Mark Gallant, Director of Operations for the Museum and witnessed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Malta. Malta Customs documents completed.

P 24 loaded aboard the UK Flagged Bavaria Express and departs Malta on 23 July. On 26 July the Environmental Protection Agency requests the serial numbers for the two General Motors 12V71N Detroit diesel two-cycle engines on P 24 before the cargo ship Bavaria departs the last European port for Norfolk. Panic. There is no feasible way to identify these numbers while P 24 is in transit. On 27 July, Don Farrell, Treasurer for the SBSA and the VUMMF, presented a \$15,000 donation collected over 10 years from SBSA members, to the Maritime Museum for the P 24 Fund. Additional contributions from SBSA and Maritime Museum members are being collected.

**August:** Jim Deal posts daily position reports for the Bavaria's ocean passage in response to an explosion of SBSA member interest. Mrs. King, widow of Vice Admiral Jerome H. King, Jr, and her daughter, Anne McFarland, asked to be invited to the arrival of P 24. She is keenly aware of how much her husband and his predecessor, Vice Admiral Zumwalt, were involved in Swift Boat operations in Vietnam. Captain Eric Moss, USN, Commander Maritime Expeditionary Security GROUP One, accepted an invitation to escort P 24 during her arrival on 28 August. On 1 October, Captain Moss will assume command as Commodore, Coastal Riverine Group ONE. "I am pleased that you sought to include my command in this event so significant to marking the work of the PCF force in our nation's defense history."

**August 14, 2012:** the Bavaria docks and off-loads P 24 in Norfolk. US Customs is inspecting the boat for weapons.

### A Tribute

While we feel the excitement surrounding the arrival of P 24 and the emotion this boat has for all those who served on or supported Swift Boats in Vietnam, we might pause to think of the men who are giving up this Swift Boat, one filled with forty years of memories. **Lt. Marco Cauchi** was the last skipper of P 24 and initially the only Maritime Squadron sailor who supported this donation idea. He believed in our plan to honor his memories as well ours. He convinced the commanding officer of the Maritime Squadron, Colonel Wallace Camilleri to support our plan. Lt. Cauchi has gone above and beyond expectations to help us on every visit with transportation, arranging meetings with government and military officials and providing local resources to prepare P 24 for her voyage to San Diego. He and his crew have saved many hundreds of refugee's lives who were trying to escape the poverty and turmoil of North Africa, crossing the Mediterranean in vessels that floundered and were sinking in storms. One of Lt. Marco Cauchi's memories is of a pregnant Somali woman and delivering her baby in the main cabin. Lt. Cauchi arranged for and skippered P 24's last voyage in Maltese waters, towing her over 14 miles from the Maritime Squadron Headquarters to the ship harbor on the day she was turned over to us. Men saluted and bagpipes played as she left the pier. On 19 July, the day before P 24 was officially turned over to the Maritime Museum, P 24 crewmen came for a last visit. Their emotion was intensely evident. **Josef Galea**, the last engineer, pointed to all the loving care he had given the engines and began giving advice on changing the fuel filters, adjusting the reduction gear and so many other things as if he were a father sending his son off to summer camp. And **Allen Galea**, who had to make an effort to keep his emotion in check, said P 24 was the most dependable of any vessel in the entire fleet of the Maritime Squadron, going out on search and rescue missions in extreme weather when other boats stayed in port. Allen's pelvis was crushed between P 24's hull and the pier when returning to port during one of these heavy weather conditions. **Stephen Ellul** is owner of a ship supply and manufacturing company. He has contributed enormous services, much at his own expense, to help the Maritime Museum and the Swift Boat Sailors who visited Malta. He designed and built the special cradle for P 24's ocean transit at near cost. Then steam cleaned the entire boat, including the engine room. This took weeks and involved collecting and disposing of the effluent. The engine room is now spotless to the amazement of Josef Galea, the last engineer.

Stephen managed all crane services used to move P 24 and he disassembled the cradle to transport it to the ship harbor and oversaw putting P 24 back into its cradle for loading onto the cargo ship Bavaria. **Ms. Vanessa Frazier**, Minister of Defense, made the decision to donate P 24 to the SBSA and Maritime Museum. There were three intense competing interests vying for possession of P 24. SwiftShips LLC offered Malta a discount on new patrol boats if they would give them P 24. The Maritime Museum of Malta wanted P 24 and so did the Maritime Squadron senior command. All three offered to create a static display. Ms. Frazier confided that our proposal to restore P 24 and continue to keep her in operational condition as a way to honor Swift Boat Sailors from both countries was the most selfless and gratifying proposal received. While she did say the competition was incredibly fierce, the decision was not difficult. These Maltese individuals and so many others have great pride in P 24's service. We have promised to repay their trust with loving care for P 24 and that she will always fly the Maltese flag with Honor.



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