

The Hostile Catalyst

The attack seemed to come out of nowhere.

On a sunny June morning in 2009 in Washington DC, as a security guard at the National Holocaust Museum held the door for an elderly gentleman, that same gentleman swung a .22 caliber rifle up from his side and opened fire. Fatally wounded, the security guard fell to the floor; immediately two other security guards on duty opened fire on the man who was severely wounded before he could unleash further mayhem.

In the aftermath of the shootings, information began to emerge about the shooter, James von Brunn, and the tormented path his life had taken before reaching its violent nadir at the Holocaust Museum. A toxic stew of racism, paranoia, and isolation had been churning inside him for years. Writings posted on the Internet revealed von Brunn to be a white supremacist, a Holocaust denier, and the creator of an anti-Semitic website. He was also an Obama citizenship conspiracy theorist.

In 1981, von Brunn had been arrested for the attempted kidnapping and hostage-taking of members of the Federal Reserve Board after approaching the Fed's Eccles Building armed with a revolver, knife, and sawed-off shotgun. He was convicted in 1983 for burglary, assault, weapons charges, and attempted kidnapping. He served six and a half years in prison.

Clearly a tormented soul, von Brunn hungered for vengeance and reprisals against a loose yet expansive network of "others" who he believed had made his life

unbearable. Settling scores had become the dominant motif of his life. That the scores existed exclusively in his mind in no way minimized their intensity or their scope. A lifetime's worth of broken relationships and marginal living situations bore testimony to von Brunn's single-mindedness in pursuing his quest to rectify those things in his version of America that needed to be set right.

Among the details of van Brunn's life that spilled out in the days after the shooting was a remarkable item that had been reduced almost to a footnote: he had been in the United States Navy from 1943 to 1957 and was the commanding officer of PT Boat 159, stationed in the Pacific during World War II. His military service put him in the same region during the same timeframe as my father, George J Stahley, who had served as an enlisted man in PT Squadrons 27 and 40 during 1945 and 1946.

The PT boats were small (80 feet, maximum) and they carried small crews (usually no more than 15). Despite the large torpedoes they carried, most of the work performed by the PTs had little to do with firing their "fish" at enemy craft. Their work was varied and often very dangerous: escorting minesweepers, nocturnal reconnaissance, ferrying commandoes to shallow landing areas, patrolling shorelines, attacking enemy communication installations, escorting landing craft during invasions, transporting VIPs like Douglas MacArthur, and monitoring the movement of enemy warships and barges.

The missions carried out by the PT squadrons forged an intense intimacy and esprit de corps among the sailors who operated the boats and staffed the bases. The

records indicate that the entire “Mosquito Fleet” of PT boats had no more than 60,000 sailors from 1941 to 1946.

What were the chances that my father and von Brunn were on the same base or, God forbid, on the same PT boat? Had my father ever been assigned to a boat under the command of this man who would later carve his name onto the nation’s consciousness with such jagged and bloody letters on that June day in 2009?

My off-again/on-again research project about my father’s PT boat career received a massive jolt on the tenth day of June in 2009. It became powerfully important for me to find out if my father’s path had ever crossed the path of this man who would explode onto the national stage as the embodiment of hatred and anger toward those who were different from him.

What relationship was there, if any, between von Brunn’s hostile, deadly actions at the Holocaust Museum and his service on the PT Boats of WWII? Was this just a random event or was there some note of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or battle fatigue, as it was known during the WWII era?

From the brief description of von Brunn’s military career, there was no indication of the twisted path his later life would follow. His service during the war earned him a commendation and three battle stars. His discharge from the service was honorable. For twenty years, he worked as an advertising executive and producer in New York City, living the lifestyle portrayed vividly in the television series *Mad Men*.

Whatever the factors were that led von Brunn to an isolated, vindictive old age, they had not made their presence known in the days when he wore the uniform of a

Navy officer and served on the PT boats in the Pacific. What happened to derail a life that had exhibited such promise and potential?

I was intrigued by the possibility that my father and von Brunn had brushed shoulders during those days when they fought together in the Navy's "Mosquito Fleet" against the naval forces of Imperial Japan. They had both served on those small, swift, vulnerable boats that engaged enemy ships and planes with far more firepower.

The need to learn more about my father's PT boat career became stronger than ever before. Who were his crewmates? Who were his officers? What missions had he participated in – missions about which I knew nothing?

After the events of June 10, 2009, in Washington DC, I was determined to get serious about exploring and documenting my father's Navy service during the war. After a deranged, violent extremist murdered a man at a national museum, the need to tell my father's story, and the story of the other noble, uncelebrated sailors who served with him, became a matter of ultimate and unrelenting importance.

I needed to do the work and share the legacy bequeathed to me and all the families of the PT veterans. There was no more time to waste.

Stephen J. Stahley

September 2010