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# Rudder

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# URBAN LEGEND

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In Mike Mayer's restoration shop in Wilsonville, Oregon, saws and jigs stand near neatly stacked rows of mahogany. Vintage flags and Chris-Craft posters line the walls, and a 1929 Hacker Craft Dolphin triple cockpit sits on blocks. Her bottom is new, and her decks too, those razor-straight seams cut from bow to windshield. The rest is original, including frames and stringers, planed and restacked sides, and her instrument panel, which will slip into a dark cavity in her dash once it's rebuilt. She still needs upholstery, several coats of varnish, and wiring. But after seven years in this building, she is close to the end of her fifty-six-year dry land voyage.

Mike, a Pacific Northwest Chapter member, runs sandpaper down her starboard side and stops outside the engine box where a curved piece of mahogany has been patched into her hull. This spot holds her history. According to legend, she was a rum runner, and this is where bullets pierced her side planks and slammed into the engine.

As the story is told, she ran back and forth from Buffalo, New York, to Canada, engine at full throttle, crates stacked up, amber liquid sloshing inside.

All kinds of boats smuggled liquor during prohibition. Reputable ocean liners and steamers carried it. Yachts, fishing trawlers, and ferries too. Customs, the Marine Police, and the Coast Guard patrolled waterways, chasing down vessels that might be transporting contraband. When authorities came near, smugglers tossed cases of alcohol overboard, passengers jumped ship, and gunfire blazed. Officials didn't necessarily want to sink ships or kill rummies, so they aimed for the engine. Boats fast enough to outrun the authorities and big enough to carry significant amounts of alcohol were highly sought after, and big racing runabouts got into the rum-running game.

Mike and his dad, Fred – dubbed Hank the Plank for his beautiful restoration work – first heard rumors of this Hacker in the early 1990s. They were told this rum runner was somewhere near their hometown of Buffalo, but no one knew where. She had become an urban legend among hobbyists.

A few years later, after a long day on the docks at the Wine Country Classics show in Hammondsport, New York, Mike and Hank took *Scudder*, their 1940 Chris-Craft 16-foot Deluxe Utility, for a moonlight ride. Lines free, fenders in, they idled out into darkness, each jockeying for the passenger seat. In open water, Mike pushed the throttle. Water pumped through the manifold, pistons sparked against a

rush of fuel, and the sound of a hundred tiny explosions blew out the long copper exhaust pipe. That Mighty B engine roared against the quiet night. Father and son, side by side, flew across the lake, the polished cutwater slicing through a shimmering surface.

They returned to their slip a half hour later and a little wind-blown. Engine off, they floated in the hush of night, and Mike talked about his fascination with the elusive Hacker. Hank was steadfast in supporting Mike's questionable choices in boat acquisition and encouraged him to search for her.

*The hunt was on.*

Mike spent the next five years sleuthing the rivers around Buffalo, peeking in boathouses, and pulling back canvas covers. He drove the backroads, tromping through overgrown fields and looking in abandoned sheds. One evening after work, Mike cruised Ellicott Creek with a few buddies in *Scudder* when she stalled and floated toward an old boathouse that looked abandoned. Mike got the engine started, but, before pulling away, he looked under the splintered door. Inside, resting on blocks eight feet above the water, were 24-feet of mahogany with the sheer lines of a Hacker.

*There she was.*

It took Mike ten years to find the Hacker's owner, and another couple of years, along with the help of Jim Holler from the Niagara Frontier Chapter, to facilitate a deal and rescue the boat.

Because she had been stored in that boathouse, out of the water, unused for thirty-five years, Mike and Hank expected she'd taken on too much water to make it to a take-out point. After a great debate, they wrapped the Hacker in Visqueen before setting her in the water. Mike took the

Opposite. The restoration of the Hacker in Mike's shop in Oregon.

Below. The Hacker wrapped in Visqueen at the take out. *Urban Legend* with varnish and name on transom in front of Mike's shop.





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helm, minding the tow lines and the forward bilge pumps. Hank perched on the rear starboard deck, minding the aft. Water rose in the hull below his feet, and sun climbed up the ladder of his spine. With several pumps and the help of Bob Boeckel, also from the Niagara Frontier Chapter, and Mike's buddy, Ron Green, they towed her out.

Eventually, she was trailered from Buffalo to Mike's shop in Oregon, where he took off her side planks and found three bullet holes under a patch just outside the engine box. He preserved the original frames, keel, side planks, transom, and hardware, but the deck boards were too short from a re-configuration by the previous owner and had to be replaced with new material. Because Mike saves all the parts until a project is complete, and many of them for years after, all of the original unusable boards went up into the rafters.

During the restoration, Hank moved to Wilsonville. Father and son stood side-by-side once again, screwing and gluing, planing and staining, giving new life to old treasure. Hank helped roll the Hacker and prep her bottom, but in 2017, before the upper woodwork began and after a long fight with leukemia, Hank passed away.

The question asked too often these days rose. How can we best honor a boater's life?

Mike looked to the old seafaring pirates for inspiration. He wanted his father to be an eternal part of the Hacker's history, but even more, he wanted his dad to be with him

every time he took the boat out. When the time came to replace the decks, Mike mixed some of Hank's ashes with adhesive and glued his father down below the king plank and aft deck boards, where he'd ridden on their first short voyage out of Ellicott Creek.

I lost my father, Louis Boswell, not long after Mike lost his dad. And that question rose again.

My father started boating in the early 50s, just after he moved to California. When a friend invited him onboard his runabout and taught him to water ski, my father was enamored. A few months later, he acquired a damaged wooden boat and began to restore it in order to escape combat PTSD.

He had served 172 days of continuous battle on the front lines of Belgium, Holland, and Germany during WWII. He'd been a Timberwolf, a specially trained night fighter, and a rifleman, which meant his unit usually crossed the front line first, resulting in a 300% casualty rate. In those six months, my father lost nearly all his men, slept in the mud and snow and marsh, and was reduced to half of his body weight. He earned a dozen medals, including a Silver Star, but his faith in everything faltered – goodness, humanity, even life after the war. He returned home in 1946 at the age of twenty-two but didn't feel like a hero. For him, the war was still going on.

To avoid relentless nightmares, he cleared out the garage, turned on all the lights, and worked into wee hours plugging screw holes, sanding side planks, applying varnish, and rebuilding a Mercury engine. Once *The Bomber*, named after the P-47s that, according to my father, "saved his ass more than once," was scripted onto the transom, he trailered her to the reservoir. He'd rip around the edge, engine roaring, soaring above the surface on full plane,



Opposite. The restoration of the Hacker in Mike's shop in Oregon.

Above. *Urban Legend* with a few coats of varnish in front of Mike's shop. Becky learning to fish with her father and brother on *The Bomber*. Staff Sgt. Louis Boswell with *The Bomber*. Arlington National Cemetery service of Staff Sgt. Louis Boswell in Urn made from the Hacker.

a spray of water dotting his sunglasses. Sometimes, he'd float in the middle, water licking the side planks, gently rocking. Other times, he'd cast a line and wait for the red top of a bobber to pull beneath the water's surface. When I was a kid, we'd snake through the wide rivers and narrow sloughs, cruising around flat islands and skiing across choppy bays. In those moments, he seemed free. In those moments, my father found joy and pleasure in living.

My father spent nearly every weekend on the water until he entered his mid-eighties, became unstable on his feet, and had a hard time getting around. After he sold his boat, we'd sit on the porch together and talk about times long ago, and I'd hold onto a wish that he'd get one more ride.

We don't always know which ride will be our last, and my father's final spin around the lake was as unexpected and uncelebrated as Hank's.

When the time arrived for my father's burial, I wanted to keep him close in the same way Mike wanted his father nearby, and I wanted him to have that last ride. I thought about putting a pinch of him in a locket and taking him out on the water, where we'd be together, rev the engine, and fly over waves like when I was a kid. But with his Silver

Star, my father had earned a place in Arlington National Cemetery. That's where he wanted to be, and they had rules. Every speck of him, every flake of ash, had to be officially labeled and sealed in the crematorium bag.

When the date of my father's funeral was set, Mike offered to craft a simple wooden urn and pulled the Hacker's old decks down from the shop rafters. It wasn't quite the wild ride I'd imagined, but it felt right that my father should make his final journey tucked inside that old wooden boat. They were from the same era. As a rumrunner, she was a transporter of spirits. As a soldier, my father helped deliver freedom.

Last year, my father arrived at his final resting place. Holding his ashes were the worn wooden decks of the Hacker, varnished to a high gloss.

Mike hopes that the Hacker will be in the water for the first time in fifty-six years this summer, as the newly restored *Urban Legend*, with Hank onboard. I hope I'll be there too, with my father in my thoughts. ✉

Becky Ellis is an author and grew up skiing behind her father's boat. Her new memoir, *Little Avalanches*, is about her father's service and what happens when a decorated war hero comes home to raise a family. [beckyellis.net](http://beckyellis.net).