



BY MICHAEL PETERS

# SIGHTLINES

## Abandon Ship

SOME RESTORATIONS CAN GO TOO FAR.



A Prowler and a Blackfin drydocked in Cadillac's backyard. Recently, *Her Grace* went to a new owner. Have a comment for Michael? Give him a shout at [inbox@pmymag.com](mailto:inbox@pmymag.com).

Every few years my wife and I go to the Mount Dora Antique Boat Festival in Tavares, Florida, an event that closely coincides with my birthday in March. Three years ago we went and stayed at a B&B and joined several other guests for breakfast, all of whom were there for the boat show. The conversation rolled around to cool, old boats and one guy mentioned a 31-foot Bertram race boat he'd heard was for sale. Being a certified Bertram nut, my ears perked up, and I asked its whereabouts. Some guy named after a car has it, I was told. It had to be my old friend Cadillac.

This all happened while I was in the middle of restoring my 1972 25-foot Bertram for the second time in 20 years. My friend Jim and I had been taking the boat down to bare bones to make *Villam* new again and I had leased a shop for the six-month project. The boat was ready for launching in early June and Jim headed back to Michigan to escape the summer heat. The problem was I had leased the shop through December and it was now empty. Idle space can be as dangerous as idle hands.

I was feeling bored and in need of another project, so I talked Jim into another venture, which I assured him was much simpler than *Villam*. So I called Caddy and headed across the state to look at his 1967 31-foot Bertram race boat. I inspected the boat with a knowing glance, made my deal with Cadillac, and took him to lunch. I never even looked inside. I was in love with her racing

ancestry and beautiful lines—and am a hopeless idiot.

My wife started really getting into researching the boat. Could it be *Master Moppie*, *Mona Lou*, *Mongoose*, or *Boss O'Nova*? No, they were all accounted for. Could it be the one that fell off its trailer upon delivery and never got raced? We never could trace our boat's origins. Bertram only built 17 of the Bertram 31 Nautic Specials and only three or four exist today in their original racing configurations. Mine was original, that is, except for the three-foot-square deck hatch and flat floor running from the engine room to the forepeak. Mine had seen life as a drug boat. As I cut through the floor with my Skilsaw, I half expected to find contraband, but instead found water! Water and rotten wood from bow to stern. A few months after buying the boat, my wife and I went to a reunion for old boat racers, called OFF (Old

Friends Forever), hosted at Cadillac's place on the St. Lucie River. Sammy James, head of Bertram racing in the '60s and '70s, as well as Odell Lewis, winner of the first Bahamas 500, were at the party. I had known Sammy for years, but had never met Odell before. These veterans of offshore racing's early years swapped lies for hours and I got excited about my vintage race boat once again. In a moment of weakness, Sammy offered to loan his Bertram photo album to me, and I got permission from Odell to name my boat *Mona Lou*. By this time I could hardly remember the rotten wood that awaited me.

This enthusiasm wore off as Jim and I worked on the boat through the winter and spring, grinding and tearing out the rotten stringers and bulkheads. One 90-degree Saturday, after I had spent the day dressed head to toe in a paper suit with goggles and a dust mask, grinding away at half-century-old fiberglass, I realized I wasn't having much fun. Jim had already figured this out, and was really hating working on the boat. As summer approached and the temperature in the shop reached over 100 degrees, Jim suddenly vanished and went back to Michigan for good. The project was dead. I lingered on by myself and finished a few small projects, but my lust for *Mona Lou* was over. I haven't touched the boat in almost two years. Sorry, Sammy and Odell, I abandoned ship.

I have recurring nightmares about grinding and recently made a deal to give the 31 Nautic Special back to Cadillac. So, soon my shop will be empty again, and an idle shop can be dangerous. Just today I asked my friend Mark to take a look at a 20-foot Bertram that I am thinking about buying for a restoration. Did I mention I am a hopeless idiot? □