

# A.P.O.V.

\*Alumni Point of View

## Li'l Duck

*A wartime love story*

By ROB HAMMOND, BA'71

**I**N THE JULY-AUGUST 1998 EDITION of *American Heritage*, I read an article, "Farthest Forward," by Dick Keresey. The article was condensed from Mr. Keresey's just-published book *PT 105*. At the end of the article, he recognized some of his friends killed in action. One of the men listed was Sid Hix.

Many years earlier my mother, Virginia Trotter, BA'42, had told me the man with whom she was in love at Vanderbilt served on a patrol torpedo (PT) boat and was killed during the war. I showed her the *American Heritage* article, and she confirmed that Sidney Hix from Gallatin, Tenn., Vanderbilt Class of 1941, was indeed the Sid Hix of the article. She pulled out her '41 *Commodore*. Tucked in the back were college and wartime pictures of Sid, as well as newspaper clippings reporting his death.

The next day I ordered a copy of *PT 105*. When the book arrived I hurriedly skimmed it looking for references to Sid Hix. I learned that Dick Keresey was the captain of PT 105 and Sid Hix was the captain of PT 108. They served together in Squadron 5, which included 12 PT boats, and were based at Rendova in the British Solomon Islands. In the summer of 1943, one of their missions was night patrol of the Blackett Strait, which bordered the southern coast of Kolombangara, a large Japanese-held island to the west of New Georgia (for photo and map, see the December 2002 *National Geographic*, pages 82–83). The PT boats were trying to keep Japanese ships and barges from resupplying their troops. John F. Kennedy's PT 109

had been lost on one of these patrols in the Blackett Strait.

Mr. Keresey describes Sid in the book as "very handsome, amiable, and earnest (Sid used four-letter words like 'gosh'). He had a beautiful girlfriend he called 'Li'l Duck,' so he called his 108 the Li'l Duck—the only boat in our squadron with a name." Because of wartime censorship my mother had no idea Sid was captain of PT 108 and had named the boat for her. (Her pictures of Sid on the 108 have the numbers cut out.) At Vanderbilt she had acquired the nickname "Li'l Duck" because her older brother, Bill Trotter, BA'41, had the nickname "Duck."

By Aug. 21, 1943, Japanese barge traffic had diminished as the Japanese retreated from New Georgia. The PT boats were assigned a new mission: to attack the barge installations on Kolombangara. Sid's PT 108 was assigned a specific cove to attack. According to Mr. Keresey the PT boat captains were worried about the raids on Kolombangara because they would begin in darkness, and the charts did not give them all the information they felt they needed. However, on Aug. 22, 1943, the PT boats made their attacks on the coves. Keresey's 105 was not to attack but to support the boats that did.

As the attack began, PT 108 was caught in the crossfire of Japanese machine guns. Sid Hix was hit in the head but managed to say, "Take the boat out." Almost all on deck were killed or wounded. The 108 was still in the water and taking fire. The executive officer and engineer were trying to keep at least one of the three bullet-riddled engines run-

ning. PT 105 came to the 108's rescue by passing between the Japanese on shore and the 108, and setting a smokescreen. The 108's wounded quartermaster steered the boat out.

When Dick Keresey returned to base, he learned Sid was dying. "Sid was lying on a cot in the medical tent, removed from the area where the doctor and the pharmacist's mates were working on those who could be saved. Sid looked very dignified and calm, as if he was satisfied he had done his best. I could only look at my friend for a brief moment before I felt myself losing control."

The revelations of PT 105 were bittersweet for my mother. Even after 60 years the memories of Sid and the pain of his death are very vivid. After learning of Sid's death, she rode the train to Nashville and took a bus to Gallatin to spend the weekend with Sid's parents. Returning from vacation on Oct. 2, 1949, Mr. and Mrs. Hix stopped in LaGrange, Ga., to see her. It was the last time she saw them, and it was the day before I was born.

On the happier side, I called Mr. Keresey in Montclair, N.J., and told him my mother was "Li'l Duck," and that she was alive and well. He gave her a call, and they had a long talk. Mother enjoyed talking with him and was very appreciative of the call. We also learned through Mr. Keresey that Sid's sister Dorothy lives in Gallatin, and that her husband, Benarr Cresap, had written a memoir of Sid. At the Sumner County Historical Museum in Gallatin is an exhibit honoring Sid and the PT 108. Geary Sims, who is updating the exhibit, sent copies of Benarr Cresap's memoir to both of us. In one letter home Sid report-



JOHN KRAUSE

Sid looked very dignified and calm, as if he was satisfied he had done his best. I could only look at my friend for a brief moment before I felt myself losing control.

ed that at mail call he had received 10 letters from my mother at one time. She had written “Li'l Duck” in the return address, and his fellow officers had given him a hard time. My mother called Dorothy, and they both enjoyed talking with each other.

Memorial Gym is dedicated to the more than 4,500 Vanderbilt men and women who served in World War II. A plaque lists the names of the 136 Vanderbilt alumni killed in the war. There are 135 other stories like Sid’s—stories of Vanderbilt men who died in the service of their country. Sid was editor of the *Hustler* and a member of Sigma Chi, O.D.K.,

and the Student Christian Association. He played baseball and basketball. His fellow students and faculty respected and admired him. He had a bright future. In letters home to his family, his thoughts were of peace, coming home, and starting over in civilian life. His life and death deeply affected the lives of many.

When Sid began training for the PT service, he served on PT 108 as executive officer under the actor Robert Montgomery. Upon learning of Sid’s death, Lt. Commander Montgomery wrote a letter of condolence to Sid’s father. He wrote that Sid was “not only efficient in the performance of his duties, but

also a grand companion.” He continued, “Out of this war and such sacrifices as Sidney has made must come a better world. When that world comes, it is to men like your son that we must give a full measure of our gratitude.”

*Rob Hammond, BA’71, has been director of Camp Laney for Boys in Mentone, Ala., since 1974. Rob, his wife San, and their two sons live in Rome, Ga., where Rob currently serves as president of the Rome Vanderbilt Club. His mother, Virginia Trotter Slaughter (BA’42); an uncle, William P. Trotter (BA’41); and his sister, Rosalie Hammond (BSN’73), also attended Vanderbilt.*