

On Living Aboard

Part II

by Gene Henson



When we did the initial rebuild of *Patty O'*, our 40-foot live-aboard sedan cruiser, there were many, many long nights sitting at the dining room table at the condo where we were living before moving aboard for good. I'd made little cardboard templates of the engines, generator and fuel tanks and I would move them around on a scale drawing of the boat, wondering how I was going to make everything fit. It was even worse when I saw the engines, tanks and generator in person. They looked huge. The smallest item by far was the generator. Originally, the plan was to install it between the main engines as there was ample room there. But my friend Ritchie, who has a lot of common sense, convinced me that to do so would be a lifetime sentence of cursing mightily every time any engine maintenance other than routine needed doing. Shuffling the little bits of cardboard again, showed that the generator would fit aft between the two black iron fuel tanks, and while not easy, everything needing normal maintenance back there could be reached.

When it came to replacing the deck, which had been removed from the transom to the companionway ladder lying below, we had another "discussion". At that point, I had become tired of the constant mess aboard and all I wanted was to get everything done as quickly as possible. "Let's just close it up," I said.

"You'll be sorry," said Ritchie.

We argued about it on and off for a day or two and he finally won by bringing up the very same scenario we were in now. "If something happens to that generator, how do you plan to get it out?"

"I'll just have to cut the deck," I replied, totally fed up with everything.

But sleeping on it convinced me that he was right and the next day we began planning a deck that while looking like an integral part of the boat, would come apart without having to destroy it.

It wasn't easy. The after bulkhead separating the salon from the cockpit, we built to come out in one piece, without twisting. The deck in the salon itself also will come out in one piece, but that was relatively easy to accomplish due to large, hinged hatches over the engines. The cockpit deck, which also covers the generator, was another story.

We tied all the stringers and longitudinals together to form one large platform, which can be lifted out (hopefully) in one unit. It was constructed in place, so this was to be the big test. Not that getting it out was easy. Ritchie had a smug look on his face when he showed up to help, but he didn't say anything; he didn't have to.

There are 26 stainless steel bolts holding the whole thing in place and while they came out relatively easily, the bedding around the edges was like glue. It took the two of us a whole morning to get everything freed up before I dropped by the yard office to find Ray, the yard manager. He agreed to bring the yard crane over and lift the deck out.

"How long ya gonna be out?" he asked. That's his usual greeting when *Patty O'* comes out of the water, repeated every time we pass close enough to exchange words. Yard managers get

nervous when any large, wooden boat is on the beach. They have this fear that it's never gonna go back in the water and that he'll be stuck with it 'till it gets cut up. Ray knows very well what shape *Patty O'* is in, but he's been burnt before.

The whole thing came out in to response to Ray pulling a lever and he swung it, dangling from the end of the cable over to the side where I had arranged several pallets to set it on. I was hoping that after the generator was out, he could just drop it back in place until the generator was ready to go back in.

It took far less time to unhook everything on the generator than it did the deck, and by two in the afternoon, I was on the phone to Mel Jefferson, the generator man and he said that he'd be here first thing in the morning. Ray grumbled a bit, but *Patty O's* cockpit deck temporarily rested back where it's supposed to be.

I had originally thought that with the deck off, I could do some painting and general cleanup around the generator mount, and maybe the fuel tanks and the after parts of the main engines that are a pain to get to normally. But after taking a closer look, it was obvious that everything was in very good shape, and nothing would be gained by poking around down there.

The rest of the afternoon I spent doing a few mundane chores like cleaning off the props and rudders, and checking the through hull fitting to the sea chest for marine growth...piddling stuff like that. Around five, I heard the "Blat" of the Saab's horn and the Blonde pulled up beside *Patty O'*.

"How's it goin', Sport?" she asked. "What's for dinner?"

"I was hoping for grinders," I replied

Grinders, the quintessential Italian sandwich of southeastern Connecticut, are not to be confused with Subs, or Submarine sandwiches found in other parts of the country. Long, hard Italian bread cut lengthwise and bulging with lettuce, Provolone cheese, fresh tomatoes, and good Genoa salami, are hard to beat. They are made too, with a variety of other things, but nothing beats the original. I know where they're still made the old way and that's where we headed.

Next morning I was sitting at the counter where I have breakfast most days, listening to the local sages pontificate at great length about everything from the state of the current political argument to global warming. It's very entertaining. Very occasionally I'll make a comment, but mostly, I just nod my head and mumble some un-comprehensible words so that they know I'm still here. I was halfway through breakfast when my cell phone rang.

"Hello, Mel Jefferson here," the phone voice said. I don't usually carry it with me, but Mel said he'd call before he got here.

"Hey Mel! Good to hear you. How soon will you be here?" I asked.

"I'm right beside the boat now," he answered.

I gulped down my coffee, pushed the plate of half-finished Western omelet aside and wasted no time getting back to the boatyard.

Now that the generator was situated in a lighted area in the big boat shed with plenty of room around it, Mel went to work. I've never seen anyone as fast taking something apart. It seemed like no time before he had the shroud off and was probing the innards of the generator. He poked and prodded and took a lot of measurements with his meter.

"Well," he said. "It's going to have to come back to the shop. It looks like maybe there was a defect in the initial wiring. It'll all be covered by warranty, and depending on what we find, we just might replace the whole thing."

My faith in the great American warranty was revived. Another grunt from Ray and the generator was firmly tied down in the back of Mel's work truck. "I'll call you as soon as I know," he said. It was a week before I heard from him again. In the meantime, there was hull maintenance to get done.

Now that she was out of the water, I figured it was a good time as any to do some painting. *Patty O's* hull is carvel planked with mahogany. She gets a fresh coat of white when needed, but I'd rather not have to deal with paint buildup. My painting routine is totally out of sync with conventional wisdom. First, I pressure-wash the hull. Then, when it's dry, I wipe it down with acetone. This etches the surface in lieu of sanding, saving a lot of time and effort. (Caution: Do NOT attempt this with a fiberglass hull. Acetone will eat it like buzzards devouring carrion.)

Next, I mix alkyd white paint half and half with thinner. It goes on like water, and you do have to chase runs, but the result is like you've spent hours sanding, and hours applying paint with a \$75 brush.

When Mel called the second time I wasn't having breakfast; I was having lunch.

"We took it all apart," he said. "And I was right: there was a defect in the original wiring. It would have cost far too much to rewind the whole thing, so we replaced the generator end with a new unit. How soon would you like delivery?"

It was a Thursday, and I didn't want to rush anyone so it was arranged that Mel would come down from Massachusetts on Monday. I ran that by Ray and got a "Humph", but he said he'd be ready.

It took another three days before everything was back to normal. *Patty O'* went back in the water with a smile on Thursday morning and we slept aboard for the first time since the incident. Friday morning I was up early as I usually am, and was sitting in the cockpit enjoying the first cup of coffee. I felt the door to the now replaced solon bulkhead open.

"Hey Sport," she said. I booked off today. What say we finish what we started three weeks ago?"

"You're on," I said. "Help me get these lines off."