

DISABILITIES LEFT DOCKSIDE"

by Bruce Burditt, from East Bay Newspapers, December 16-17

Walter Schulz' thought was to spring veterans from the home for a few hours, wheelchairs and all, and take them out in a beautiful boat.

"We could all be Ernest Hemingway for a day, go fishing, share some laughs, explore the bay in a boat just like Hemingway used to have."

The first such boat he has in mind is his *S.O. (Spirit Of) Pilar*, a near-identical copy of "perhaps the most famous American sport fishing craft of all time." It is Mr. Schulz's replica of Hemingway's cherished 1934 boat *Pilar* (no longer seaworthy and on display in Cuba). This *Pilar* is a wooden boat that Mr. Schulz owned from 1990 to 1992, then sold, then bought back a few years ago in tough shape.

It didn't look all that much like the 38-foot *Pilar*, "but dimensionally it was almost identical." So as part of the restoration, he rebuilt the bow... "one of the most complex bits of restoration we have done here" at his Shannon Yachts in Bristol. Then, working from old photos and drawings, he added a redesigned cabin, roof, and countless details to create a near perfect match of the original ...black hull, green cabin top and all.

Beamy, stable and boasting a huge aft cockpit, he figured this would be just the thing to take wounded veterans..any disabled person..out fishing or for a cruise. A friend set him straight about that.

"Dick (retired Bristol dentist Dr. Richard Ramos, brother of Shannon Yachts Vice President Bill Ramos) told me I was missing something pretty obvious about taking people in wheelchairs out for a boat ride ... It was so obvious, so stupid of me to overlook that I was angry at myself for missing it."

Dr. Ramos once loved sailing - had a series of boats that he raced and cruised until multiple sclerosis ended that and his dental career. He'd still love to get out on boats, he told me, "but for the bathroom ordeal ... Except for ships, most boats, even those that call themselves accessible, aren't even remotely set up to make it easy and comfortable for some one in a wheelchair to use the bathroom ... and when you're out for a few hours, no getting around it, you've got to take a leak." Which sent Mr. Schulz back to the drawing board.

The result is a design for a platform at the cabin door that will raise and lower hydraulically. "You'll be able to roll right onto it, lower yourself down into the cabin and to the head" which is set up for wheelchair access and has a curtain for privacy.

"It's nothing very complicated but it makes it all work..I bought a wheelchair to see if what I was seeing on the computer (CAD design program) would function..it does ...This is supposed to be all about fun and what fun is it having to ask a bunch of guys to hoist you around in your chair

to get to the bathroom. Not much."

So swept up in the effort..he calls it "a Life changer for me" ..has become that Mr. Schulz has set up "The Shannon River Heritage Foundation" to help grow the project.

In addition to S.O. *Pilar*, which should be ready to go next spring and will be docked at Brewers Sakonnet Marina in Portsmouth, he is hoping to buy a used Shannon Shoalsailer 32 sailboat (also broad-beamed and stable) that he will convert to a "Warrior 32." This, too, will feature the hydraulic hoist-to-the-head and will be set up and rigged with disabled sailors in mind. The aim is not merely to take disabled folks out for a ride, he said. "Those limited by special needs will not just be passive passengers, they will learn the skills of boating by actually sailing and skippering the boats themselves." Imagine being able to sail over to Potters Cove and spend the night."

Driving the project, he said, is his growing frustration with the way this country treats its veterans, especially those who've been injured.

"We have far and away the biggest defense budget in the world yet so many of these people come home broken and mostly forgotten ... Can you believe that 500,000 ..half a million veterans are unemployed. It's shameful."

Among the foundation goals is to provide work at Shannon to some disabled veterans, hopefully converting other boats for disabled access.