

"The Sinking Of The Fireboat Virgil Spencer"

Source: Bill Powell

Regarding the sinking of the Virgil Spencer on its maiden Voyage, Bill Powell, Superintendent of Apparatus, Retired, offered this passage:

John Hetrick was the Fire Apparatus Superintendent when I was hired in early 1973 and had quite a bit of information which he shared about the "submarine" or Virgil "Sinker" to which that boat was jokingly referred to by some back then (no reflection on the firefighter, Virgil Spencer of course).

When I worked in the shop as the mask man, I had the responsibility for the propulsion pumps and other maintenance on this boat because of my background in pump overhauls and maintenance, During the early sea trials on the Willamette, after delivery of this boat, the *Spencer* picked up a small piece of flotsam in one of the pumps, starting a serious cavitation problem which "hammered" a hole into the pump housing. With 3,000 gpm of water dumping into the hull, which had never been compartmentalized, the boat nearly filled with water to deck level. The pilot, sensing a serious problem, steered the boat to a nearby barge and a crewmember quickly secured the bow to cleats on the barge to prevent it from sinking completely, keeping the bow up for later salvage.

The pump housing was tested and found to not meet the specifications. Rohr Boat Co. in California had it shipped back to them so they could make repairs. A major bulkhead was installed between the pumps and engines to minimize the risk of a reoccurrence. I believe it was re-powered at the same time to get more horsepower.

The "over" engineering (for firefighter safety, of course) of this craft was typical of earlier PFD fire apparatus - 3/8" aluminum plate overall rather than 3/16"- which doubled the weight to horsepower ratio. The *Spencer* could barely get on plane. I personally spent numerous hours wading in shallow water changing jet nozzles. I requested frequent drydockings to sort out the problems but could never get past the 40 ton weight of this boat. I believe the *Spencer* was sold early the 90's as surplus and resides on the Oregon Coast somewhere.



In 1983, the new *George H. Williams*, built by Workboats Northwest in Seattle, was held to a 20 ton maximum weight. The *Williams* (with 3/16" aluminum on most of the structure) would get up on plane on one engine.

The Portland Fireboats and their crews fill a critical part of this department's overall protection of the City and I thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent with them.