

Bill Tripp's Boats

A look back at the portfolio of a sailboat designer who was among the first to embrace the material technology of fiberglass.

by Ted Jones

Graphics courtesy of the author
(except where noted)

Upon discharge from the U.S. Air Force in 1958, I went to work at a yacht brokerage in Greenwich, Connecticut, where I learned the business, and after about a year, hired on at the newly formed design/brokerage firm Tripp & Campbell, with offices at Rockefeller Plaza in New York City.

I knew Bill Campbell from my pre-Air Force days, but I'd never met Bill Tripp, whom I knew only by reputation.

Tripp & Campbell had all the indications of becoming the next Sparkman & Stephens—talented yacht designer combines with wealthy backer and broker. Tripp, in fact, was an alumnus of S&S, having worked there after World War II and before starting his own practice in '52.

What follows is not a biography, or profile, or even a comprehensive retrospective. Rather, as a former colleague



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and longtime friend, it is basically my take on Bill Tripp's best-known designs, with comments on the context of those particular commissions.

- Bill Tripp's 43' (13.1m) custom *Georgiabelle* was a lovely red-hulled centerboard yawl, the precursor to many similar designs from the Tripp drawing board. But the boat that really got Bill Tripp noticed was *Touché*, a radical, flush-decked 47' (14.3m) sloop that had proven almost unbeatable in her early races on Long Island Sound. Because of his reputation for designing race-winning sailboats, prospective boat owners began beating a path to Bill Tripp's door.

Tripp's first sailboat design specifically for fiberglass was the 32' (9.8m) production model *Galaxy*, for American Boatbuilding of East Greenwich, Rhode Island. But before the first *Galaxy* could be built, a group of offshore sailors approached Tripp to design a 40' (12.2m) fiberglass centerboard yawl, also to be built by American Boatbuilding. That boat would become known as the Block Island 40. (The design was originally to have been produced in The Netherlands and called the *Vitesse* class.)

Fiberglass was by no means unfamiliar to Tripp; I'd been aboard

an early FRP powerboat he'd designed in the late 1940s. It was launched in Port Washington, New York, and had no gelcoat. I remember well the eerie sensation of being down below, watching wavelets at the waterline on the outside of the hull.

Of that first batch of Block Island 40s, all did extremely well in the 1958 racing season, and several entered the Bermuda Race of that year.

Since fiberglass was still a relatively untried material at the time, Tripp specified a conservative, heavy layup. The cost of production and other factors, though, conspired to put American Boatbuilding out of business—but not before the company had delivered a half-dozen *Galaxys*.

The *Galaxy* had unusual features for its time: an essentially flush deck surmounted by a low-profile gun-turret-type doghouse, a broad beam, and a wide, plumb transom that "just didn't look right" to most traditionalists. In fact, many sailors thought the *Galaxy* was plain ugly. It also had a fin keel and spade rudder, predating Bill Lapworth's successful Cal 40 design by several years. In the right hands, the *Galaxy* sailed very well.

- It was at this stage of Tripp's career that I started with his and Campbell's

Facing page—Bill Tripp, standing before a T/L 29 (8.8m), a sloop he designed for FRP production by the Lentsch yard (the "L" in T/L) in The Netherlands. See page 70 for a view of this fine performer under sail. The talented Tripp died in 1971 at the age of 51.

Above—Two seminal boats in Bill Tripp's design legacy: the 43'/13.1m custom centerboard yawl *Georgiabelle*, left, and the 47'/14.3m sloop *Touché*, right. The latter's racing record on Long Island Sound attracted a lot of design business. Note her nearly flush deck—a recurrent feature on many of Tripp's boats.

On Structure, Spars, and Fittings

The first "field trip" I took with Bill Tripp, soon after joining his New York firm, Tripp & Campbell, was to accompany him on a plant visit to Pearson Yachts, then located in Bristol, Rhode Island. Tripp picked me up in his Jaguar XK 150 from my home in Rowayton, Connecticut, on his way from Long Island. It was a trip we were to make together several times.

The purpose of our visit was to check on progress in the construction of the first Pearson Invicta 37 (11.3m). In the course of the day, there was a somewhat heated discussion between Clint Pearson and Tripp regarding the specifications for the fiberglass hull layup. Pearson argued that it was much too heavy, would cost the company unnecessarily, and force him to increase the price of the boat above its market value. Tripp won the day, though, in my opinion, by eventually agreeing with Clint Pearson that contemporary engineering theoretically allowed for a lighter structure—but, since fiberglass was still a new material, no one knew how it would behave over time. The safest course,

he said, was to overbuild the laminate in key areas until such time as engineers, designers, and boat manufacturers gained more long-term experience.

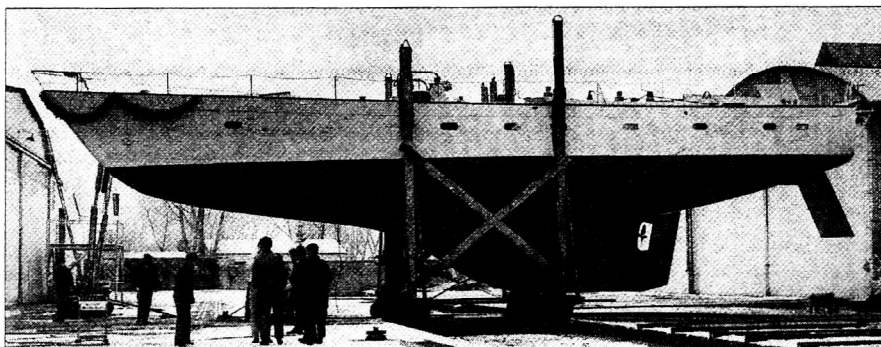
The Block Island 40 was one of the first fiberglass cruising sailboats designed from scratch for this material (the Rhodes Bounty 41/12.5m and Chinook 34/10.4m were initially based on pre-World War II wooden boats). There are critical areas where the hull thickness is almost 2" (50mm) of solid fiberglass/polyester laminate, which we would consider today to be at least four times stronger than necessary.

Tripp had, arguably, more at-sea experience than other designers and certainly most builders, having served aboard converted yachts in the Offshore Patrol, whose function it was to watch for and report enemy submarines off the United States coastline during World War II. Manned mostly by volunteer yachtsmen, the Offshore Patrol stayed at sea for long periods in sometimes frightful conditions, winter and summer. Tripp's wife, Shelley, downplays his service with the Offshore Patrol,

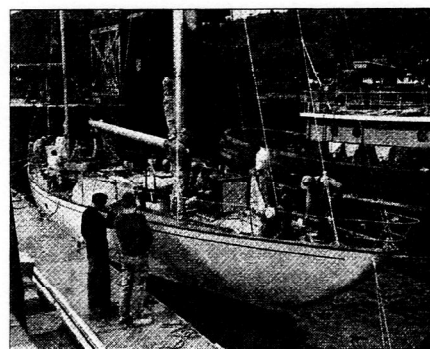
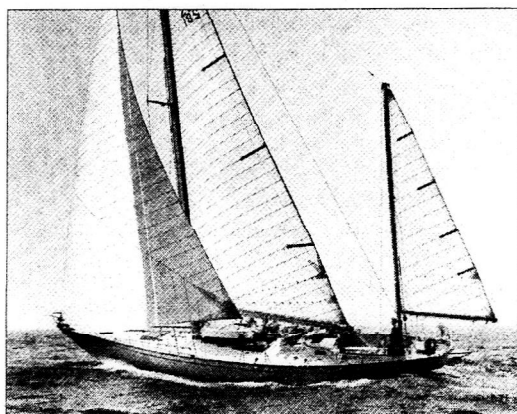


The Block Island 40 (12.2m), a centerboard yawl intended for offshore work, was one of the first production-sailboat designs Tripp designed specifically for fiberglass. The BI 40's construction was robust, but Tripp never apologized for a decidedly conservative approach to structure.

recalling that Bill graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy during World War II, received his commission, and served as navigator aboard an LST in the Pacific. Tripp's varied wartime sea duty no doubt strongly influenced his design philosophy. Significantly, after the war former members of the Offshore Patrol



New Yorker Sumner A. Long (called "Huey" after the famous Louisiana politician) had Tripp design a series of custom aluminum ocean racers, all named Ondine, which gained considerable fame in their own right, culminating in a powerful 74-footer (22.6m), above. Long's first Ondine, in 1959, was a 57-footer (17.4m), seen here under sail and at dockside.



firm in Rockefeller Plaza. We occupied two rooms at a snazzy address but a less than snazzy office. Campbell and I shared the smaller room, while Bill Tripp, Walter Bleumhardt—Tripp's design assistant—and Mary Ryan, our secretary, had the larger room, along with the design and correspondence files.

On the drawing board then was an offshore racer soon to become famous: Sumner A. "Huey" Long's custom aluminum 57' (17.4m) *Ondine*, under construction on Long