

feature

Wheeler 38

WORDS BY  
**BRUNO CIANCI**  
PHOTOGRAPHY  
BY **BILLY BLACK**

A recently-launched replica of *Pilar* – the legendary fishing boat owned by American novelist Ernest Hemingway – is the first in what is expected to become a production-line model. While she retains the original's classic looks, her equipment is contemporary.



# RECREATING



# H

emingway's (1899-1961) novels earned him Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, but he was almost as famous as an active sport fisherman. It's said he caught his first fish at the age of three and became 'hooked for life'.

He and *Pilar* spent much of his life in his favourite hunting grounds – the scalene triangle whose vertices touch Key West in Florida, the Bimini's archipelago (Bahamas) and the Cuban coast.

A sport fishing innovator and a trendsetter, *Pilar* is believed to have had the very first flybridge and outriggers, accessories that soon became common aboard fishing boats. *Pilar* (his second wife's nickname) not only out-fished and out-performed most of the competitors of her time, but in the 30 years that

Hemingway owned her she rode out four tropical hurricanes, a testament to the craft's soundness and her owner's bravery.

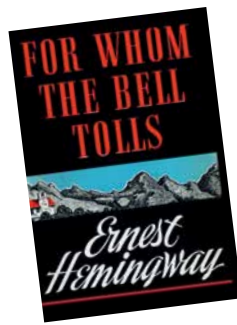
*Pilar* was also the first known boat to deliver an immaculate giant tuna to the jetties of Bimini undamaged by sharks, also thanks to the fishing techniques introduced by the writer. Hemingway perfected the technique for retrieving the caught fish as quickly as possible, preventing it from being devoured by the predators that infested Caribbean waters.

The boat began life as a stock vessel, marketed as the twin-cabin 38-foot 'Playmate', fitted with a 70hp six-cylinder Chrysler Crown petrol engine generating a top speed of 16 knots. Hemingway, though, specified several amendments to better suit his requirements.

These included a Lycoming engine for trolling at low speed



# A LEGEND



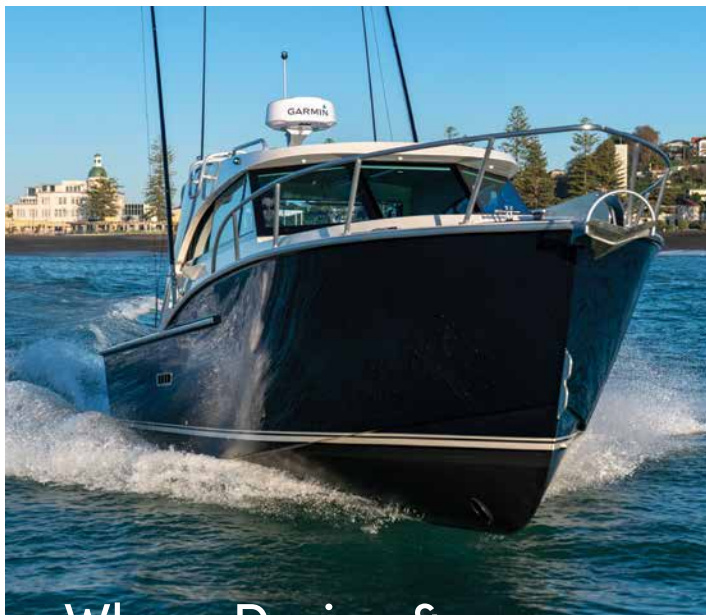
**CW FROM LEFT**  
The original *Pilar* lands another marlin; one of Hemingway's best-known works; the man himself at *Pilar's* helm.



(3 knots), extra stowage and bigger tanks, a flybridge with a steering station, the abovementioned outriggers, a live well, a practical transom roller (to facilitate the hauling of big fish) and a fighting chair in the cockpit.

Later, during WW2, the boat was also equipped with communications gear and direction-finding equipment to enable the writer to locate and transmit the position of German submarines in the Caribbean (an activity for which he was authorised by the US government). But that is another story.

Today the original *Pilar* is at Cuba's Finca Vigia, near the capital city of Havana, preserved as a museum artefact. Hemingway donated her to the seaman Gregorio Fuentes (1897-2002), a former hired captain who allegedly inspired the



Where Design &  
Technology  
Deliver Experience

Start the journey  
Visit [dickeyboats.com](http://dickeyboats.com)

**DickeyBoats**  
DRIVEN BY INNOVATION

**pier21**  
MARINE CENTRE



- 50 tonne Travelift
- All trades available on-site or D.I.Y.
- Drystacks • Marina

15 Westhaven Drive • ph 0-9-374 4461  
email [info@pier21.co.nz](mailto:info@pier21.co.nz)

[www.pier21.co.nz](http://www.pier21.co.nz)



**ABOVE** The original *Pilar*, preserved in a Cuban museum, and right, construction of the replica.



Santiago character from one of the writer's most famous books – *The Old Man and the Sea*. In turn, the boat was donated to the people of Cuba by Fuentes.

### **FAMILY BUSINESS**

The building of *Pilar* replicas has been a project 20 years in the making – and was created by American Wes Wheeler. He has always been fascinated by Hemingway and his novels, but additional impetus for the project came from a desire to revive the business of his ancestors.

It transpires that the design for the original *Pilar* was based on the famous 'Playmate', a boat built by the Wheeler Shipyard Corporation, established in 1910. The founder was Howard E. Wheeler – Wes' great grandfather.

The company produced fine vessels for some 50 years, and it was this reputation for quality that drew Hemingway to Wheeler back in 1934. In his pocket was US\$7,495 (US\$146,000 in today's money) to purchase the fishing boat he dreamed about.

Wheeler also produced a fleet of ships for the Navy and



# REDEFINED FOR THE ULTIMATE EXPERIENCE



Introducing a new generation of our D4 and D6 propulsion packages, from 150–480 hp. After having spent years refining and developing the proven platform ever further, this complete system delivers new exciting features – from helm to propeller. All to offer you the ultimate boating experience.

Visit our store or [www.volpower.co.nz](http://www.volpower.co.nz) to learn more.

Distributed by **Volpower NZ Limited**  
for New Zealand & Pacific Islands  
ph. 0800 865 769 or 09 2744305  
[www.volpower.co.nz](http://www.volpower.co.nz)

Authorized dealer for Volvo Penta

## NEW D4 & D6 PROPULSION PACKAGES

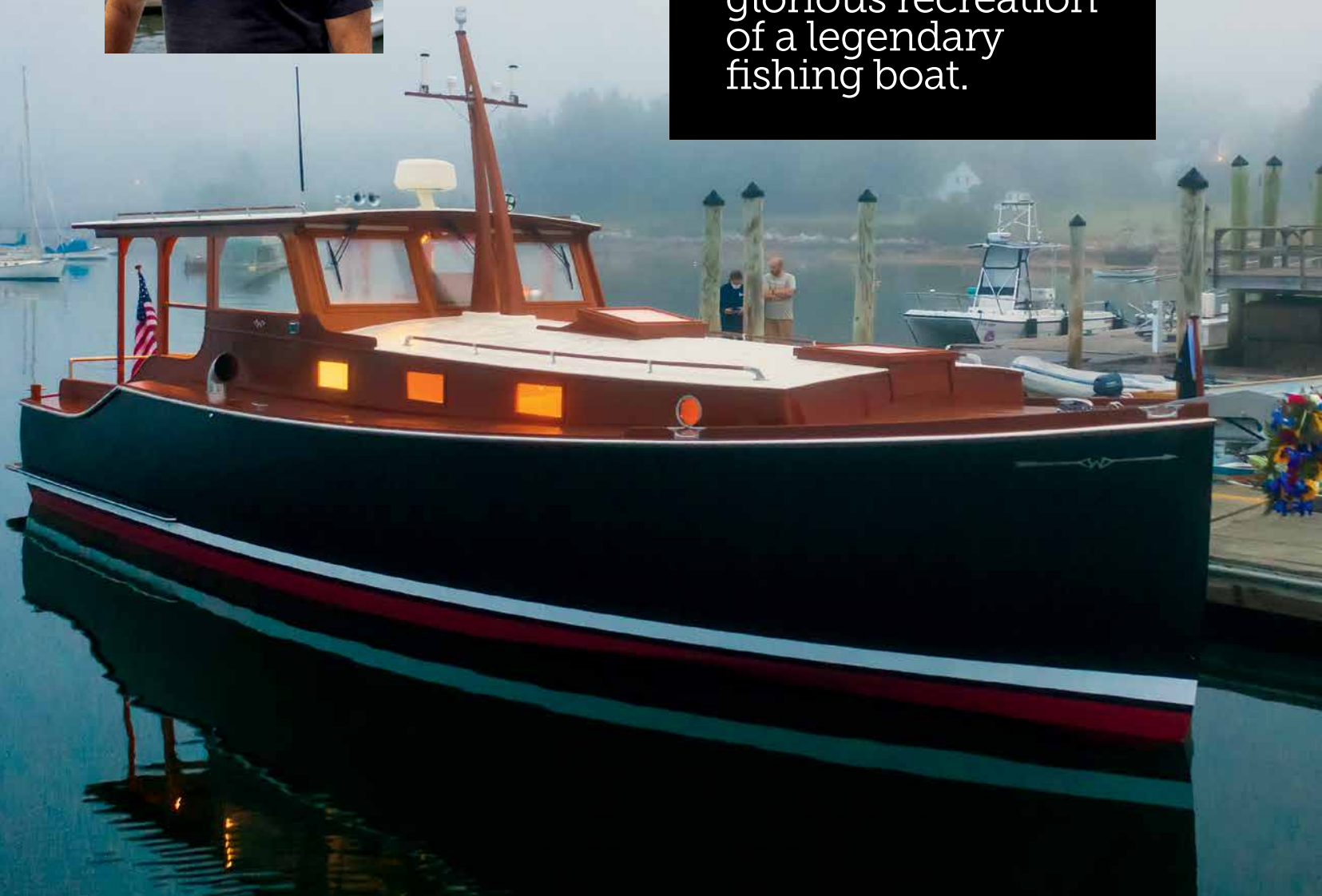
# VOLVO PENTA



**ABOVE & RIGHT** The interior of the new boat.

**LEFT** Wes Wheeler – he was fascinated by Hemingway and his work, but also wanted to revive a family tradition.

...a happy combination that's resulted in a glorious recreation of a legendary fishing boat.





**BELOW** A faithful replica of a famous fishing boat – a cause for celebration.



Coast Guard cutters during WW2. At the peak of production more than 6,000 people were employed at the shipyard, including Wheeler's five sons. The shipyard built more than 3,500 craft over its half-century existence. Among them were many sea-skiffs and motor cruisers.

The challenges involved in 'recreating' *Pilar* and reviving the brand were many and varied, says Wes, the greatest of all being how to build the boat and target the right clientele. It would require different construction techniques and modern technology.

"We reverse-engineered *Pilar* from original plans and measurements. I took these measurements myself from Hemingway's boat with the kind help of the Cubans. It was painstaking work – I had to make sure the measurements were perfect. Keeping the 'new' *Pilar* looking authentic was one thing – but it had to be done in such a way so that we could fit modern systems and equipment."

Given the expectations of today's buyers, the boat would also have to perform better than the original. As a result the hull was re-designed to plane, enabling the craft to reach higher speeds with superior comfort. The new boat runs at 32 knots – double the speed of her illustrious ancestor.

Interior layout and finishing have been tackled to ensure the look and feel of the boat remain faithful to her origins. Appropriately named *Legend*, the new boat was built by the Brooklin Boat Yard (in Maine) and, like the Wheeler dynasty, it too boasts many generations of shipwrights from one family. It is the only Wheeler-authorized builder.

History, tradition, boatbuilding skills and extended familial bonds – a happy combination that's resulted in a glorious recreation of a legendary fishing boat.

Hemingway would have been impressed. **BNZ**



**SPECIFICATIONS**  
**LEGEND**

- design** Marek Yacht & Design
- architecture & engineering** Bill Prince Yacht Design
- loa** 39'4"
- lwl** 38'9"
- beam** 12'0"
- draft** 3'5"
- displacement** 20,600 lbs
- fuel** 250 US gallons
- fresh water** 85 US gallons
- black water** 25 US gallons
- construction** cold-moulded (Douglas fir, African mahogany & teak)
- propulsion** twin Yanmar 370hp diesels (8LV370)
- generator** Cummins Onan 13.5kW
- accommodation** sleeps 4
- top speed** 31.5 knots
- cruise speed** 23 knots
- range at cruising speed** 400nm (approx)