Bolling Douglas: Breaking the Fiberglass Ceiling

Bolling Douglas, marine surveyor and boating standards expert, looks ahead — and back — at her life on and around the water.

Grit, self-reliance and a willingness to work hard are the defining characteristics of the "greatest generation," those who grew up during the Depression and came of age with World War II. Bolling Douglas, a member of that generation and a pioneering marine surveyor as well as a recognized expert in recreational boat standards who recently retired, spent some time with *BoatU.S. Magazine* last month, talking about the marine industry that she embraces but has sometimes battled.

Douglas, who was the first woman to serve as district commodore of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, served as president of the American Boat and Yacht Council, an industry advisory group that recommends manufacturing standards for recreational vessels. The position gave her a platform from which to promote the importance of safety standards to the marine industry even when it sometimes wasn't ready to listen. Douglas relished the political aspects of her role with ABYC, but as a hands-on person she's also spent decades serving on several of the council's project technical committees that actually research and develop the standards that make boats safer. The organization gave her its Lifelong Service Award earlier this year.

Thus, Douglas is in a good position to take a critical look at the marine industry. While she credits mandatory manufacturing regulations created by the Federal Boat Safety Act of 1971 for a steady reduction in the number of boating fatalities over the years, she says boatbuilding still isn't perfect and never will be.

"The problems are still there," she said, citing the risk of carbon monoxide exposure and boat designs that aren't strong enough to withstand heavy weather and sea conditions. "These boats are built for high speed and for oceangoing, but some are not designed to withstand forces of waves and weather because the designers themselves don't have firsthand experience with this type of operation." She also noted that many builders don't have structural engineers or naval architects on staff to actually evaluate new designs.

Douglas said many manufacturers today still do not fully accept responsibility for the flaws in their products, but the development of American Boat and Yacht Council standards, as well as boat certification by the National Marine Manufacturers Association, has helped. "The way the builders are now coming to view their responsibility has made a big difference." For

example, more attention is now paid to the way boats are wired, making them safer and less prone to fires. Douglas believes builders are better at handling warranty claims, too.

The osmotic blister damages so prevalent in the 1980s are a case in point. Blisters now have been all but eliminated. But two decades ago, some manufacturers didn't take responsibility for the boats they built. "They just didn't accept that their products had flaws." Now, she said, fiberglass hulls are usually "okay right out of the box." And some, but not all, companies offer warranty coverage if blisters do occur.

Improvements are due, in part, to the industry's focus on skills training. Marine technician training courses are offered by ABYC and skills seminars are a well-attended feature of industry trade shows.

Still, she said, "builders can do better. The industry has got to be more responsible and get experts on board who can design boats that will sustain the impacts they're exposed to."

But, she added, that's probably not going to happen because the industry is market-driven. Manufacturers produce what sells, so production costs and marketing sometimes trump practical approaches to building a safe boat. This trend is not likely to change because the weak state of the economy has put the marine industry in "survival mode" and manufacturers are not likely to adopt practices that will add to the cost of their products.

Douglas would also like to see more boaters take the time to learn boating skills because "the public has a responsibility to learn to handle their boats in all conditions," she said.

Increasing fuel costs have an impact on the industry, as well. "As long as the cost of energy is high, boating is going to change," she predicted. "There will be more sailing and more diesel-powered vessels."

"Diesel and solar power are the way to go," she said, describing how it costs less than $10 a day to run her 25-foot Nimble Nomad, thanks to its diesel engine and a bank of solar panels.

Time-shares, boat rentals and other nontraditional ways to get on the water are another possibility. In fact, they might be a solution for families who may not be able to afford owning a boat but don't want to give up the sport altogether.

"I can't say where we're going from here," Douglas said, but looking back, "having a chance to witness and speak for recreational boating has been life-fulfilling. It's brought me to a place I never dreamed I would get to."

Many who work in and around the marine industry, including this writer, have benefited from Douglas's guidance, encouragement and mentoring.

Marcia Kull, general counsel for Volvo Penta in the U.S., said, "Looking back, Bolling Douglas was probably my only female mentor in the boating industry.

"I met her just as I started to become involved in ABYC technical meetings in the late 1980s. The boating industry is full of men, but at technical functions even today, the typical ratio is 4 or 5 to 1. All of the time back then, Bolling and I were the only women in the room.

"Bolling held her own during the give and take and sometimes contentious discussions typical of the standards writing process," Kull recalled. "She pulled it off because she was technically as savvy and experienced as anyone else in the room. She encouraged me to speak up when I was still trying to find my voice, networked me into old cliques and always gave me a big hug when I walked in the room. Diversity always opens the eyes to new ways of seeing things. Bolling's involvement, even as the only woman on a committee, brought better perspective to the gathering and its ultimate work product."

Patricia Kearns, a Naples, FL, marine surveyor and technical editor of *DIY Boat Owner* magazine published by BoatU.S., agrees. "I served a very rigorous apprenticeship with Bolling, before setting out on my own career as a surveyor.

"Her work has saved lives unknown to her," Kearns said. "She is a woman of extraordinary ways and means, a national maritime treasure."

For Douglas, the boating life began on the St. Johns River near Jacksonville, FL, where she learned to sail with the rest of the neighborhood kids. She credits this early experience, which included learning to build and repair boats and engines, for her characteristic self-reliance, confidence and what those of us who know her can only describe as grit.

"I bought my first boat, a little sloop, for $10 when I was 10 years old. Boats were cheap during the Depression," Douglas recalled, characterizing herself as a "river rat," maybe her favorite title of all the ones she's earned.

"I used to wonder, 'How am I going to fit my passion for boats into my adult life?'" she told us. Marrying and having three children didn't stop her. "We built an eight-foot pram in the laundry room." The pram, powered by a single sail and one oar, figured in an article she wrote for *Boating Magazine*, "Sail A Crooked Mile," describing her 220-mile cruise on the Savannah River in the early 1960s. "That was the beginning."

Next came a 29-foot Richardson built in 1931. She rebuilt the engine under the tutelage of a local car mechanic who made space for the project on his workbench. Over the years, there was the *Red Dragon*, a Chinese junk certainly the only one of its kind on Lake Lanier in Georgia and probably for hundreds of miles up and down the East Coast. More recently, she's traveled from Florida's inland waterways up to Lake Champlain aboard her Nimble Nomad, *Celebration*.

Says her son, Allen Douglas, Jr., "Her boats, if they could talk, would have some adventures to relate, especially the Bertram, *Finale*, as that boat's endurance was challenged in her hands on several occasions and never failed."

Douglas studied celestial navigation with the U.S. Power Squadrons and also established a U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla in Augusta in 1960, where the family lived because her husband was an executive for Southern Railway. Less than 20 years later, she was elected the first female district commodore for the Auxiliary.

She finally broke into the industry when a marine surveyor friend handed her his survey practice in Lake Lanier, GA, in 1972. "That's how it all started," she said. In 1975, she became the first woman to receive accreditation by the National Association of Marine Surveyors and the same year obtained her pilot's license. A Cessna 182 made it possible to fly all over the South to surveying assignments. "It was wonderful," she said.

Her company, Marine Associates, took off just a few years after BoatU.S. began in 1966. In fact, she met BoatU.S. founder Richard Schwartz when both served on the National Boating Safety Advisory Council, which was created after the Federal Boat Safety Act of 1971 was enacted in Congress due, in large part, to Schwartz's efforts.

"Ever since then, BoatU.S. has been a favorite of mine," she said. "BoatU.S. has always been a leader in making the mariners' world a better place."

Her son Allen took the wheel at Marine Associates when his mother retired. He told BoatU.S., "Many challenged — or tried to challenge — her knowledge of and expertise in maritime matters and seamanship. They learned quickly not to challenge. To my knowledge, she has never lost such an argument."

For this self-described "river rat," that's not a bad record.

— By Caroline Ajootian