

Bob Wood is working on the latest in a long line of unusual boat building projects.

By Margo McDonough

Bob Wood, dwarfed by his 14-foot-high steel sailboat, feels there's something special about the number 64.

He calls his dock, tucked behind the American Legion in Havre de Grace, Pier 64. And in the dim light of his garage, one can make out the characters on his license plate: Pier 64.

What started it all, though, was his plan to build the sailboat himself. He wanted it to be 64 feet long.

Wood, tall and lean with close cropped hair, began planning three years ago. He says he didn't want an average fiberglass, or wood boat. He decided on steel, which, he says, is commonly used in European boat-building.

Some of his friends, he says, thought he was crazy, but Wood, 54, co-owner of Har-Ce Construction in Havre de Grace, has undertaken unusual projects before.

He's been handy with his hands ever since he can remember, starting with rowboats and kayaks he constructed as a boy. Were these early vessels seaworthy? "I'm still here, aren't I?" replies Wood.

He soon moved on to full-scale construction projects through his business, rebuilding airplanes in his spare time.

He admits this is his "grand finale" project; that nothing will top it. Wood set off for a steel mill the day after Christmas 1982, to pick up 32 sheets of steel weighing nine tons.

The pile of sheets he dumped at Pier 64 that blustery day was the first step toward his dream of sunny winters in the Caribbean, lazing on the boat he plans to name "Hummer."

After another year-and-a-half or so of weekend and evening work, Wood will be "setting off for the islands."

Wood intends to go into semi-retirement. Six months of his year will be spent in Bermuda, the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, "where I can go in six months."

Wood is fiercely independent about his project. He says about 98 percent of the estimated 6,000 hours needed to complete the boat will be put in by himself. Other than guidance from Tidewater Marina, Wood has enlisted the aid of only two workers. In 1982, a Havre de Grace man, Phil Powell, wanted to learn welding, so Wood set him to work on the sheets.

The first step toward construction was deciphering the blueprints "that weren't very good." He bought them through an advertisement in the back of a magazine. A temporary wooden frame,

called a strongback, was set up upside-down at the pier. Metal plates were welded over this and stringers, horizontal reinforcements, were welded on.

In September 1983, the boat was flipped right side up, a “nerve-racking” task that took more than four hours.

Right now, the boat is being sandblasted, primed and painted. This is the first the boat has really been noticed by town residents, says Wood, because previously the unpainted steel blended in with the surroundings.

It’s also the first time he’s had any complaints about the project. Diners at the Legion are complaining about the dust from the sandblasting. However, by way of apology, Wood says the blasting is almost completed.

Clad in a baseball cap, red-checkered shirt and jeans, Wood jumps up on a lift by the side of the boat, a sheet of plywood serving as its floor. He then steps over onto the boat.

At 64 feet, Wood says his boat is the largest in the area, with sailboats at Tidewater only reaching about 53 feet. He knows of a 64 foot boat being built in Chesapeake City, but says that his is “definitely one of a kind.”