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The perfect ending for a 'Perfect Storm' hero

By LISA HOFFMAN
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A rusty Navy tug that was a hero of the Iwo Jima battle, and decades later starred in the real-life "Perfect Storm" rescue, has been saved from the scrap heap.

The nearly 60-year-old vessel was spared that ignominious fate by the hard work of former crewmembers who couldn't bear to see her die, along with a last-minute \$300,000 donation from an anonymous booster who had read of the ship's peril.

"Perseverance and dumb luck" was the way long-ago crewmember Serge Obolensky, one of the coordinators of the rescue mission, described how he and the others saved the World War II salvage ship-turned-Coast-Guard-cutter.

If all goes well, the 205-foot ship will be transported by May 1 from her current temporary home in Baltimore's harbor to eventual dry dock somewhere in the Richmond, Va., area. Former crewmembers will assemble April 20 from all over the country to prepare the vessel for that final journey.

The remarkable history began in October 1943, when she was launched as the USS Zuni, a Navy salvage tug dispatched soon after commissioning to the World War II Pacific theater. When the war ended, the Zuni had been awarded four battle stars, an extraordinary feat for a ship commonly relegated to the backwaters of history.

In the Pacific, the "Mighty Z," as the crew dubbed her, took part in four key invasions, and saved two torpedoed U.S. cruisers, two transports and many small craft and other vessels. During the brutal battle for Iwo Jima, the crew beached the tug alongside an out-of-commission landing craft, and under fire unloaded munitions and cargo desperately needed by beleaguered U.S. Marines.

After the war, in 1946, the refitted ship began a new life for the Coast Guard as the Tamaroa. For the next 48 years, she racked up a remarkable record of search-and-rescue and law-enforcement missions. She conducted 12 drug busts, seizing one vessel carrying more than 16 tons of marijuana.

It was in search-and-rescue that the Tamaroa made her civilian mark. When the Andrea Doria sank in 1956 off Nantucket, Mass.,

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she was the first on the scene. Over the years, she rescued the crew of a Soviet freighter as well as those of dozens of yachts and fishing vessels.

Her most famous moment came on Halloween 1991, during the fierce storm off the East Coast immortalized by "The Perfect Storm" book and movie. In it, the Tam braved 80-mph winds and 40-foot swells to save three people from the sinking sailboat Satori, then turned around and saved four Air National Guardsmen after their own rescue helicopter ran out of fuel and crashed into the churning Atlantic.

"I don't think there's a modern vessel that has more history," Obolensky said.

The Coast Guard decommissioned the ship in 1994 and parked her at a Hudson River pier in New York City. As he drove to work one morning that year, Manhattan property manager and former Tamaroa crewman Bill Doherty spied her there, sitting ugly, ungraceful and rusting away. So began a seven-year odyssey to save her.

Doherty and other crewmembers lobbied state and local officials on the Tam's behalf, and came tantalizingly close three times to finding her a permanent home. But all fell through. Then, earlier this year a savior appeared in the form of a wealthy ship enthusiast who read about the Tam in a boating magazine and offered \$300,000 to save her.

The donor, who gave the money on condition that he remain anonymous, has ownership of the ship for a year, at which time it will be transferred to the care of the nonprofit Tamaroa Maritime Foundation. The group intends to fix her up and open her to the public and students for tours and demonstrations.

First, though, they've got to get the ship ready to move. On the Tamaroa's Web site (<http://www.tamaroa.org>), word has gone out for volunteers to help prepare her, especially engineers, electricians, boatswain's mates and quartermasters.

"What we are doing will make us feel young again," a recruiting message on the site says. "Those who follow us will remember what we left for the future."

(Reach Lisa Hoffman at [hoffmanl\(at\)shns.com](mailto:hoffmanl(at)shns.com))

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