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'Perfect Storm' tugboat rescued

By Jennifer Harper
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Calm waters are ahead at last for a beloved old tugboat that trails both history and heartstrings in its wake.

The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Tamaroa, once beached at Iwo Jima and later immortalized in the movie "The Perfect Storm," has found safe haven. The 59-year-old "Tam" has been rescued from the grappling hooks of the scrap heap and is now destined to become a floating museum.

"It is a labor of love and luck, and it's hard work. But this is a happy, rare thing," said Harry Jaeger, chairman of the Richmond-based, nonprofit Tamaroa Foundation (www.tamaroa.com).

He will board the ship at moorings in Baltimore Harbor this weekend with 31 volunteers from a dozen states, each helper prepared with sleeping bags and long johns to spend the night in the old berths.

"We're coming with our tools, with our fire extinguishers, with our trash bags," Mr. Jaeger said. "And we have our mission cut out for us."

He is not alone in his quest to rescue a historic ship. Maine-based maritime historian Andrew Toppan says there are 140 vintage naval vessels in various states of preservation around the United States, among them 34 submarines, seven other tugs, a dozen destroyers and one icebreaker.

Love of an old ship is compelling — and inspiring. But it is a complicated, expensive business with few protocols, rare replacement parts and even rarer operational funds. The Tam's own journey has been perilous.

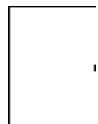
Up for public auction only a year ago, the 205-foot-long ocean-going salvage tug could have easily been sold for scrap despite her four battle stars awarded for duty at Pearl Harbor, Tinian and Saipan as the World War II-era Navy vessel "SS Zuni."

Then there are her five decades of search-and-rescue after she was reclassified a U.S. Coast Guard "medium endurance cutter," not to mention her Hollywood fame.

In 1991, the Tam was instrumental in rescuing three crew members of the sailboat Satori off Nantucket Island in 40-foot seas with 80 mph winds — as told in Sebastian Junger's best-selling book and subsequent film, "The Perfect Storm."

But difficult weather comes in all forms. After she was decommissioned in 1994, the Tam went through several owners, was abandoned and eventually put up for auction last spring as a "watercraft" by the General Service Administration. The auction took place in a lot that

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included seven motorcycles, 137 cars and a fire engine.

The Tam eventually was bought for \$62,000 by an Alabama-based maritime salvage company that brought the Tam back to operating condition. Then something wonderful happened.

"A businessman bought her and decided to pass her on to us," Mr. Jaeger said. "He wants to remain completely anonymous. We took custody of her in March and eventually will have full ownership."

Over the coming weekend, he and his motley assortment of former Tam crewmates, New York firefighters and sundry admirers will fire up the old diesels and "turn the screw over," documenting every moment on video. On April 27, they will return to sail the Tam to her new moorings a mile away, next to the hospital ship the USS Comfort.

"Her lease is up and we've got to move her to a spot that's actually been donated close by. Eventually, we'll sail or have her towed to Norfolk and get her cleaned up in dry dock," Mr. Jaeger said.

"Her real home port is Richmond, where she'll become a museum and an educational platform for the public and people like the Sea Scouts, hopefully in about a year or so," he added.

The real challenge, though, is not barnacles and cranky diesels but the complicated business of fund raising and public relations.

While the Tam's final journey will take awhile, other preservation project ships have not been this lucky. Mr. Tappon notes the fates of other historic vessels like the 1934 tug Comanche, which was scuttled in the early 1990s, and the 1944 minesweeper Inaugural, which sank in floods years ago. Others were doomed to scrap, despite frantic attempts to save them.

There are some heartening success stories, though. San Francisco's Maritime Park boasts several historically preserved ships, now so elegant that they are used as event sites for swank weddings and corporate parties. For example, one can rent the old ferry boat Eureka — complete with a picturesque, onboard fleet of 1920s-era automobiles — for \$2,000.

"We've got the spirit, but we need the cash now," said Mr. Jaeger, who noted that an estimate on the liability insurance alone for the Tam is \$11,000. "This is just the start of our trip."

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