

Tamaroa Slugs Her Way Through History

by Bill and Judi Doherty

They came because she needed them. They were ex-Coasties, swabbies, civilians, engineers, businessmen, friends—volunteers all. She was the former USCGC *Tamaroa* (ex-USS *Zuni*), the hero ship immortalized in Sebastian Junger's best-selling book, *The Perfect Storm*. Decommissioned in 1994, the "Tam" had been unceremoniously tethered to a New York City pier and left to languish, untended and exposed to the elements for six years. By autumn of 2000, her hull and deck were rust-stained and peeling; she was taking on water through rotting gaskets.

Those who rallied around the ship felt she deserved better. For more than fifty years, the *Tamaroa* had sheltered her own crews and snatched countless others away from an ocean perpetually starved for souls. Sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers made it home from sea because the *Tam* did her job.

First commissioned by the US Navy in 1943 as USS *Zuni*, one of seventy in her class, she began her service to the country as a salvage tug, handmaiden to other ships more glamorous than she. Immediately, she distinguished herself in the Pacific theater of World II. It was the 205-foot *Zuni* that towed the crippled USS *Houston* (CL-81) to safety after the cruiser took two torpedo hits during a Japanese aerial blitz to answer raids on Okinawa and Formosa in October 1944. A month later, it was USS *Zuni*'s sturdy hull, lashed to the side of the careening USS *Reno* (CL-96), that kept the wounded cruiser upright and afloat as it was drawn from battle. Again, it was the *Zuni*, in a desperate maneuver to

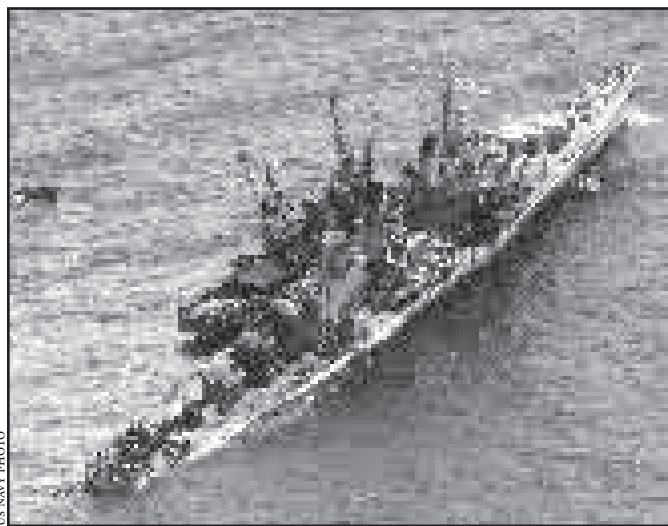


COURTESY USCGC

USS *Zuni* was renamed USCGC *Tamaroa* when she was transferred to the US Coast Guard. In this November 1946 photo (above), she had recently switched ownership but had yet to go through the physical transformation reflecting her new identity. (below) With a black hull, no. 166, *Tamaroa* began her work with the Coast Guard and would serve another 48 years before being decommissioned in 1994.



COURTESY USCGC



US NAVY PHOTO

USS *Zuni* alongside USS *Reno* in 1944 in the Pacific. *Zuni* kept the torpedoed cruiser upright so she could be stabilized for towing.

offload munitions and cargo to a beached LST at Iwo Jima, that was herself deliberately beached onto the shore beside the stricken vessel. Later, in yet another salvage operation, her towing cable parted and wrapped around her propeller shaft, killing two men. Unable to maintain propulsion or steerage, she drifted ashore, onto Iwo Jima's Yellow Beach. Holed and with a broken keel, the salvage tug was salvaged herself and towed off the beach and taken to Saipan and on to Pearl Harbor for extensive repairs. While she was still in shipyard, the war ended.

After earning four battle stars in WWII, she was decommissioned in 1946 and transferred to the US Coast Guard, where, as custom dictated, she was renamed in honor of a Native American tribe. Tugboat *Zuni* was reborn USCGC *Tamaroa*. The Coast Guard painted her hull black, designated her as a WAT, and gave her the hull number 166. Her designation was changed to WATF in 1956 and to WHEC in 1966.

In her new role in service to the Coast Guard, *Tamaroa* found herself off the coast of Nantucket, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1956 on the scene of the infamous ramming and sinking of SS *Andrea Doria*. There, the *Tam* served as somber escort to the Swedish ship held responsible for the tragedy, MS *Stockholm*. She continued on to perform honorably in fisheries law enforcement and drug trafficking control, making twelve drug busts and carrying out countless search-and-rescue missions. Never once did she tire of wresting souls away from the sea.

In the 1980s, she even helped New York City cope with a sanitation strike when she towed garbage barges to other ports. Ultimately, however, it was the "Perfect Storm" of 1991, the deadly meteorological event made famous by writer Sebastian Junger, that immortalized *Tamaroa* to the rest of the nation.



COURTESY USCG

First on the scene after the Andrea Doria (above) had collided with the ship MS Stockholm in 1956, Tamaroa and another USCG cutter, W-91 (in photo below), escorted the Swedish liner back to New York. The Stockholm suffered severe damage in her bow section but was able to make it to port under her own power.



COURTESY USCG

In that Atlantic storm of storms, *Tamaroa* had just come to the rescue of three distressed sailors from the sailboat *Satori* off Nantucket when she was sent back seaward to rescue the crew of a New York National Guard HH-60 helicopter, which had run out of fuel during its own rescue mission and plunged into the sea with five crewmen onboard. *Tamaroa* slugged her way through monstrous waves to battle for the lives of fellow rescuers. That time the sea blinked first—the near suicidal effort of the *Tamaroa* and her crew saved the lives of four of the five crewmembers. The cutter and her crew were awarded the Coast Guard Unit Commendation and the Coast Guard Foundation Award.

Again and again, like a sea-going version of the “Little Engine That Could,” the *Tam* and her crews thought she could—and she did. Countless people had depended on and used her for half a century, but, with the dawn of the new millennium, it turned out that the battered old ship was the one in need. So when the call for help went out, people remembered her tireless efforts and came. It was payback time.

I had served as Seaman on the *Tam*’s Deck Force in 1967-68. Spotting my old ship rusting away at a dock in lower Manhattan, I began researching her status and broadcasting her plight. I wrote to newspapers, posted notices on the web, called dozens

of people, and sent letters to military leaders and politicians. I discovered that, after her decommissioning in 1994, *Tamaroa* had been turned over to the Hudson River Park Trust for use as floating offices. She found a temporary haven at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum on Manhattan’s lower west side, which allowed her to berth at their pier for a short while. The Trust’s plan was ultimately abandoned and, along with it, the *Tamaroa*. The cutter’s ownership reverted back to New York State and was eventually turned over to the Government Services Administration (GSA), the federal agency charged with auctioning off surplus government property. In September of 2000, I wrote an Op-Ed letter to the *New York Daily News*, expressing my dismay at the poor treatment the *Tamaroa* was receiving. Almost immediately, any agency which had been involved (Intrepid Museum, Hudson River Park Trust, New York State) wanted nothing to do with her.

This plea for help, however, did not go unanswered. Individuals and groups heeded the call: the crew of the fireboat *John J. Harvey*, who had experience with acquiring and restoring an historic vessel, the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance, former Coast Guardsmen, friends, and family. On a cold, gray Veteran’s Day in 2000, a new type of rescue party boarded the *Tam*. Joining me onboard were members of the *Harvey* and a trio of I.U.O.E. (International Union of Operating Engineers) Local 94 engineers: James McClellan, Fred Varone and Dom Vezza. Unsure if we could save her from the razor blade factory, at the very least, we wanted to get the water out of her bilges and keep her sound while we worked on a plan. Equipped with portable generators and pumps, these unlikely bilge rats pumped her dry, cleaned and sealed the hatches, studied her blueprints and made a promise not to abandon her.

The tiny coalition of *Tam* admirers continued the fight right up until the last day of the GSA auction. When word was received that she had been sold, instead of despair, we held on to hope and sent word to the winning bidder offering our help. That strategy paid off. Months later, the new owner contacted me and Serge Obolensky, who had served on the ship in 1983 as the Independent Duty Corpsman and was now my partner in working to save the ship from the scrap heap, inquiring as to the

This photo shows Tamaroa painted with the red slash, which was adopted in 1967 for Coast Guard vessels, vehicles, and aircraft.



COURTESY USCG



COURTESY USCG

Tamaroa's rigid-hull inflatable rescue boat is sent to help the crew of the sailing vessel Satori during the "Perfect Storm" in 1991. Crewmembers from the sailboat had issued a mayday call about 75 miles south of Nantucket. After the three Satori sailors were safely aboard the cutter, Tamaroa's job wasn't finished. She was sent back seaward through monstrous seas and hurricane-force winds to rescue the crew of a downed National Guard helicopter, which had run out of fuel during its own rescue efforts and crashed in the North Atlantic.

possibility of setting up a not-for-profit group to take over and restore the ship. A meeting was set up in Baltimore early in 2001 to meet with the current owner, a prospective owner, and several interested parties, including a number of former crewmembers. We presented our case, then went home to wait for the verdict.

After weeks of nail-biting, word was broadcast over the internet—"the *Tam* is ours!" The newly formed Tamaroa Maritime Foundation had succeeded in negotiating a

partnership with an interested owner who acquired the vessel's title and had already begun the search for investors to help raise the \$300,000 needed to make her seaworthy again. That spring, the Tamaroa Maritime Foundation held its first work day. Former crewmembers wondered if they might see old shipmates again and were anxious to see how much their ship might have changed over the years. As former shipmates showed up on the dock, memories of younger days instantly rushed forward.

The original volunteers, the "bilge rats" who answered the call to stabilize Tamaroa as she sat neglected at a pier in New York City, pumped her bilges, sealed her hatches, and began to plan for the ship's recovery in the face of overwhelming odds.



PHOTOS BY M. E. WHALEN

Manning her decks made us young again—forget the extra pounds gained or hair lost! We had a lot to worry about as well. So many setbacks and disappointments over the past few years had made us leery. Would we do right by her? For the moment we were just grateful that someone else was joining the fight to restore her.

On a Saturday morning, this gang of over-aged teenagers was gearing up to get to work. While I was getting organized for the day's tasks, I looked up and saw old shipmates Richie Cunningham, Bob Leonti, and Tom Kocan walking toward me, ready to lend a hand. Thirty-five years evaporated in an instant and the representatives from the 1967 crew reveled in the moment before getting down to business.

We had plenty of work to do, but it seemed that everywhere we stepped, the slightest thing would bring memories bubbling up to the surface again. SAR (search and rescue) cases were suddenly remembered with clarity. Even something as mundane as forming a human chain—from the dock up the gangway through the mess deck and two decks down—to load dry stores brought smiles to our faces again. As joyful as it was to reminisce, a huge job still lay ahead. We divided up according to our skills. While engineers and former safety officers punch-listed all of her blemishes, leaking pipes, rust, and corrosion, in the engine room, her former MKs (Machinery Technicians) and Electricians Mates were attempting to bring her back to life. We listened as the main engines fired up, coughed, faltered, and started up again. Each engine had a couple of problems here and there, but eventually we heard that throaty rumble and understood that she was waking up after a nine-year sleep. Every time the MKs fired up an engine, crewmembers all about the ship paused for a moment and just listened. It was as if a heart was being resuscitated.

In the task of reviving the physical structure of the ship, we have also sought to revive her history. With that pursuit, the question was raised and debated about which of the vessel's two identities—USS *Zuni* with the US Navy and USCGC *Tamaroa* with the Coast Guard—should take precedence. After much discussion, the name of our organization was recently changed to the Zuni Maritime Foundation (web site is now www.zunimaritime.org). We publish a quarterly newsletter, "The Mighty Z Tribune," and have launched a Yahoo! message board where former crewmembers can visit and look for long lost shipmates. Modest dues have been established for those that wish to join our cause.

The Zuni Maritime Foundation seeks to make the ship seaworthy and then send her to sea as a training ship and educational platform for young people with the hope that some

of them might consider joining the Navy, Coast Guard, or Merchant Marine.

Returning the ship back to her original name was initially met with a lot of skepticism and even anger by several former Coast Guard crewmembers. By doing so, we hope the ship will generate more publicity through her first life as USS *Zuni*. As it turns out, she is the last surviving naval ship from the Iwo Jima invasion fleet, and the US Navy has been extremely helpful in donating surplus parts. Many of the people who have worked hard to get her this

far are pleased that she will be saved—period. One *Tamaroa* veteran told the Board that he didn't care what color she was, that he just wanted her to survive so he could walk the decks with his children and tell them about his service on this ship. Ironically, as soon as we changed the name to *Zuni-Tamaroa*, we received clearance to leave Baltimore. The ship is now in Newport News, Virginia, and we are negotiating for dry-dock space

and with organizations for all manner of equipment to reinstall on her decks.

We hope she will soon see fair winds ahead and following seas with her new persona. To represent her long duel history, plans call for a small museum dedicated primarily to her *Tamaroa* years (1946-1994) to be built onboard in place of a section of her after berthing. Right now, funding is our biggest priority—we need money to get her hauled out so we can check the condition of the hull. Individuals and organizations interested in helping in any way should visit the web site for more information. ⚓

Bill Doherty served aboard USCGC Tamaroa (1967-1968) as Seaman (E-3) for his first ship assignment out of boot camp. Today, he serves his former vessel as historian for the Zuni Maritime Foundation (formerly the Tamaroa Maritime Foundation).

USS *Zuni* - USCGC *Tamaroa* Awards

- USCG Unit Commendation with Three Stars
- USCG Meritorious Unit Commendation with Four Stars
- Navy "E" Ribbon with Three Stars
- Bicentennial Unit Commendation
- American Campaign Medal
- Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal with Four Battle Stars
- World War II Victory Medal
- National Defense Medal with Three Stars
- USCG Humanitarian Service Medal with Three Stars
- USCG Special Operations Service Ribbon



The 2002 work party in Baltimore.

COURTESY TAMAROA MARITIME FOUNDATION