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Auction of historic salvage ship tugs at heartstrings

By Jennifer Harper
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

She is 58, she's no glamour girl and she weighs in at 1,731 tons. But folks sure do love the Tam.

The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Tamaroa, that is, which trails both history and heartstrings in her wake. Once beached at Iwo Jima and later immortalized in the movie "The Perfect Storm," this faithful old tugboat is now for sale as surplus government property.

On Wednesday, the Tam went up on the auction block, listed under "water craft," along with seven motorcycles, 137 cars and a firetruck—all for sale through the General Services Administration (GSA).

The agency has taken pride in the fact that the Tamaroa has washed up in its realm, sending out a laudatory press release extolling the ship's "heroic rescues" and Hollywood ties.

"Inquiries were coming in only hours after we made the announcement," said spokeswoman Deborah Ruiz. Interested parties can track the bidding process at www.gsa.gov/auctions/gov.

Already, 11 persons have bid on the 205-foot vessel, technically an "ocean-going salvage tug" or a "medium endurance cutter," depending on the historic account. The current top bid is \$15,888 — the price of a modest automobile.

Which is history at its cheapest.

Originally, she was launched into the sea off Portland, Ore., in 1942 as the SS Zuni — a U.S. Navy vessel that won four battle stars for duty at Pearl Harbor, Tinian, Saipan and Iwo Jima. She went over to the Coast Guard in 1946, was renamed Tamaroa and spent nearly five decades on search

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and rescue, ice patrol and law enforcement.

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 the film and book versions of "The Perfect Storm."

Now the Tam must weather a different kind of storm.

A graceful retirement is an expensive proposition. Though she has become a beloved icon among former crews, the Tam has no safe harbor — a common fate of the aging ships, aircraft and transport vehicles of old wars — and youthful memories.

"The Tam spent all those years serving her country, now she's been let down," said Bill Doherty, a Coast Guard veteran who served on the ship in the late 1960s and later organized a group of concerned admirers.

"A ship is a living thing which deserves to be used, not bandied about or left to deteriorate," he added.

And old ships do get bandied about. When the Tamaroa was decommissioned in 1994, she was on a kindly heading — sent to New York City to float alongside the USS Intrepid Air & Space Museum, destined to be used as headquarters for the Hudson River Park Trust.

The plan fell through, however. She was moved to another pier while other plans came and went. Now she's just gathering rust, Mr. Doherty said. Last year on Veterans Day, he organized a group of "bilge rats" to come pump out her innards.

"We'd get so close to a rescue, then they'd pull out of the deal," Mr. Dougherty said. At the group's Web site (www.tamaroa.org), a poll of some 400 Tam fans found that 84 percent hoped she would be reincarnated as an "educational tool for Sea Scouts," a youth group.

Beyond sheer history, the ship is also a symbol for "the common sailor," Mr. Doherty said. "You should see the correspondence from people here and overseas."

The fans have their own tribal divisions, according to Serge Obolensky, another of the group's organizers. There's the "Zuni crowd," who remember her as "the Mighty Z," from World War II, he said.

"There are the black hull people, from when she was painted black for the Coast Guard. And the white hull people, from a few years later, and the racing stripe hull people," Mr. Obolensky said. "Everyone has their memories."

In the meantime, it's business as usual at GSA. The auction continues until March 29, when the Tamaroa goes to the highest bidder. She could be sold for scrap — the worst possible nightmare for those who love her.

"I hate to say this, but I'd rather see her sunk to form a coral reef than sold off for parts," noted Mr. Obolensky.

The Tam may have a hidden benefactor, though.

"There are some people behind the scenes" who may be interested in purchasing the ship, promised Mr. Doherty, who has contacted a few " 'Perfect Storm' people" about the situation.

"She may end up as a floating classroom yet," he said. "We've got our fingers crossed."

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