

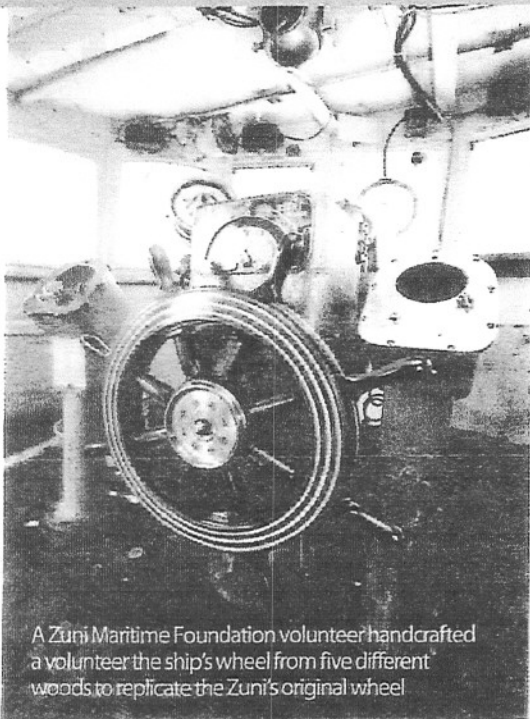
THE MIGHTY

AFTER FACING YEARS OF WAVES AND WAR,
THE ZUNI MARITIME FOUNDATION TUG
MAY HAVE FOUND A HOME IN HAMPTON ROADS
THANKS TO SOME DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

Zuni during WWII (at Iwo
Jima February 1945)



BY PHYLLIS SPEIDELL
PHOTOS BY JOHN H. SHEALLY II



A Zuni Maritime Foundation volunteer handcrafted a volunteer the ship's wheel from five different woods to replicate the Zuni's original wheel

In the midst of a battle few survivors will talk about, Glenn Fox looked up and saw the U.S. flag raised on Mount Suribachi. With the roar of Marine cannons reverberating around him, he could spot Japanese soldiers scrambling among the boulders further down Iwo Jima's black sand beach. It was February 1945 and Fox was 18, a Navy machinist mate aboard the USS Zuni, and too busy to be scared—or aware, he says, of “how much history was being made up there.”

The Zuni, an ocean-going tug just 205 feet long, was not one of the Navy's bigger or glitzier ships, but she had a knack for being where history was happening. Built for power, her job was to tow disabled ships to safety and to assist the LSTs or landing crafts in offloading troops and cargo. Thousands of US troops were lost in the Pacific Theatre during World War II but Fox and his shipmates aboard the Zuni, like other tugs attached to the Third Fleet, saved uncountable lives and several larger ships.

“We tagged along behind the big boys in the fleet and did almost all the invasions,” says Fred Smith, the Zuni's radioman, remembering that they had already been through the Luzon, West Carolina Islands, and Palau Islands operations by the time the Zuni got to Iwo Jima.

“Tugs were kinda looked down on during the war,” he says. “I remember we were in the Philippines doing a little bottom welding when the Reno passed us going out of harbor and the guys called out to us to make sure our rubber band was wound up tight.”

“But the worm turned when we rescued the Reno two or three days later.”

The cruiser had been torpedoed in her port side by a Japanese submarine.

“We spent two days patching up the cruiser while battle ships circled us to protect us from Japanese submarines,” Fox says.

After earning four battle stars in World War II the Zuni transferred to the Coast Guard to be redesignated USCGC Tamaroa.

Based in New York she served in law enforcement, drug interdiction, oceanography and weather patrols—as well as search and rescue, including a couple high-profile missions.

She was the first on the scene in July 1956, when the Italian liner Andrea Doria and the Swedish ship Stockholm collided in the fog off Nantucket and she escorted the crippled Stockholm to the New York harbor. When the Perfect Storm ravaged the East Coast in October 1991, she was the cutter that plunged through record-setting swells and winds to rescue a sailboat in distress and the crew of a downed Air National Guard helicopter.

But her guts and glory career ended when she was decommissioned in 1994. Like a homeless veteran, the Zuni spent the next decade wandering the East Coast seeking a safe refuge.

RESCUING THE RESCUER

Fortunately there is an almost umbilical tie between sailor and ship in the fleet tug family, a bond that inspired a small group of dedicated veterans and volunteers to rescue the ship that saved so many others.

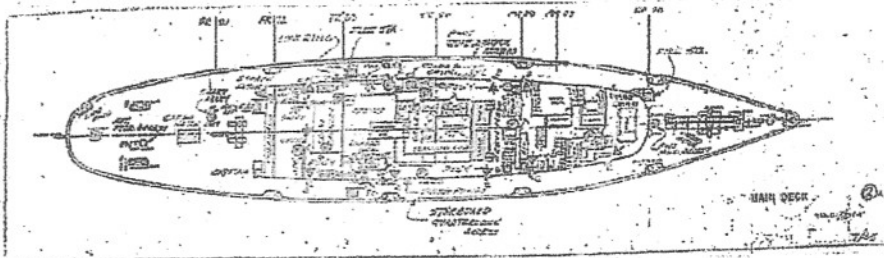
After a series of temporary and make-shift berths, numerous rejections and failed plans, the Zuni Maritime Foundation, founded in 2001, has finally found a safe, secure, if still temporary, home for the Zuni/Tamaroa at the Naval Amphibious Base Little Creek in Norfolk.

Rust splotches her battleship gray hull and many of her fittings have disappeared, likely into the hands of souvenir hunters. She's the last of the fleet tugs at Iwo Jima and said to be the last operable of the 600 vessels in that battle. She has, more than once, been tagged "the little ship that could" and her would-be rescuers are hoping she still can.

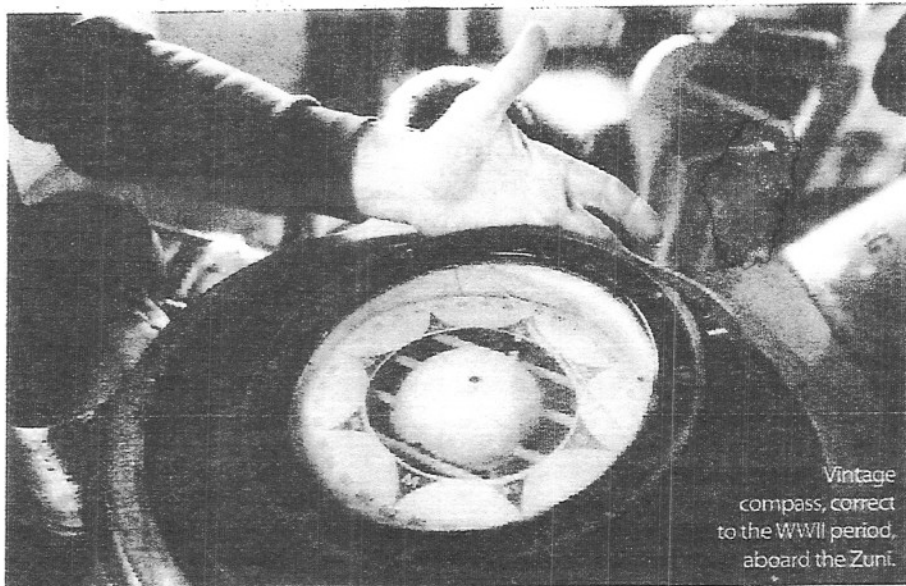
Their goal is to restore the ship to full operating condition as a floating classroom and training ship to share the history of the working class cutters and tugs with youth groups, ROTC and Coast Guard Auxiliary programs as well as the public. The volunteer group is aiming toward a permanent berth, perhaps in the Richmond/Hampton Roads area.

"We're not talking about just a restoration of a ship but about a ship as a medium for all this history we're gathering," says Harry Jaeger, head of the Foundation. "There are a bazillion human interest stories about this ship."

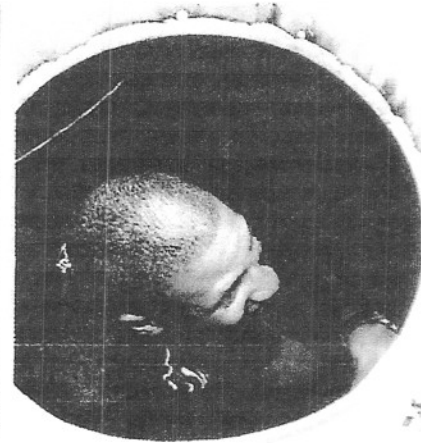
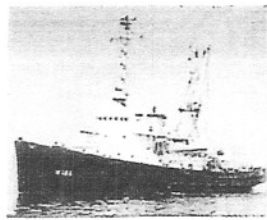
Fox was 17 and working on B-17's at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio and Smith was an 18-year-old New Mexico bean farmer who had never seen an ocean when they enlisted in the Navy in 1942. They're plank owners of the Zuni, the first and only ship either one served on. Fox, who still lives in Ohio, and Smith, in New Mexico, have both visited the Zuni in the last few years and support her restoration.



The Zuni Maritime Foundation has copies of the original ship building plans.



Vintage compass, correct to the WWII period, aboard the Zuni.



The Zuni/Tamaroa over the years. The Zuni/Tamaroa was built as an ocean going tug of the WWII era Navajo class.

Coast Guardsman Lewis Pyrtle checks out the Zuni – inside and out.

"When I saw her in Baltimore three years ago, I could pick her out across the bay," Smith says. "It was emotional to see her after all those years and I've been talking about it ever since."

AT IWO JIMA

"The Mighty Z," as her crew nicknamed her, had already rescued the Reno and one other cruiser when she arrived at Iwo Jima late in February 1945. For 31 days after her arrival she laid submerged fuel pipelines to

the island, pulled transports off sandbars and assisted LSTs.

"We'd tie up next to LSTs and push them on the beach or if they were damaged and couldn't get off the beach, we'd pull them out to sea," Fox says. "If they were damaged too badly we'd shoot them full of holes and sink 'em."

Then the Zuni ran aground, although accounts differ as to how. Some blame a tangled tow line and strong surf; others say she beached while alongside a disabled LST,



Miraculously they were the only two fatalities the ship would ever suffer.

ON BOARD THE ZUNI

Jaeger, in a sweatshirt and work tattered jeans, shows us around the Zuni, from the engine rooms to the bridge. The original four General Motors engines stand clean, almost gleaming, and several of the ship's compartments appear well furnished. A few pieces such as the weapons lockers are original, but the vast majority are scavaged items, including the helmets in the armory (from the USS Des Moines) and the communication equipment in the radio room.

Jaeger's proud of his finds—including a 1944 "still in the box" magnetic compass that will go into the pilot house. His backyard in Richmond is filled with other salvaged treasures.

Walking to the bow deck he says, "Now we need a gun, a three inch, 50 cal deck gun, single barrel."

He dreams big—as do most of the volunteers. Like Jaeger, a retired Navy senior chief and former leader of National Association of Fleet Tug Sailors, Inc., some of the volunteers have served on the tugs, several aboard the Zuni/Tamaroa.

Richard Cunningham, from Deale, Md., served on the Tamaroa from 1966 to 1969 and is now the assistant operations officer with the foundation. "There's a cadre of us, 15 or so shipmates from those years, that are all still very good friends," he says.

He meets us in the wardroom where Jaeger's wife, Shirley, brews up robust black coffee to fuel the 30 or so hands-on volunteers, many of them in their 70s and 80s, who show up as often as they can to work on the boat.

George Doran, 80, retired Navy and one of the Navy's original SEALs, lives in Virginia Beach. His fond memories of his first ship, the USS Tillamook, another fleet tug, prompted him to help restore the Zuni—and he often totes along his bagpipes to pipe *The Navy Hymn* from the deck.

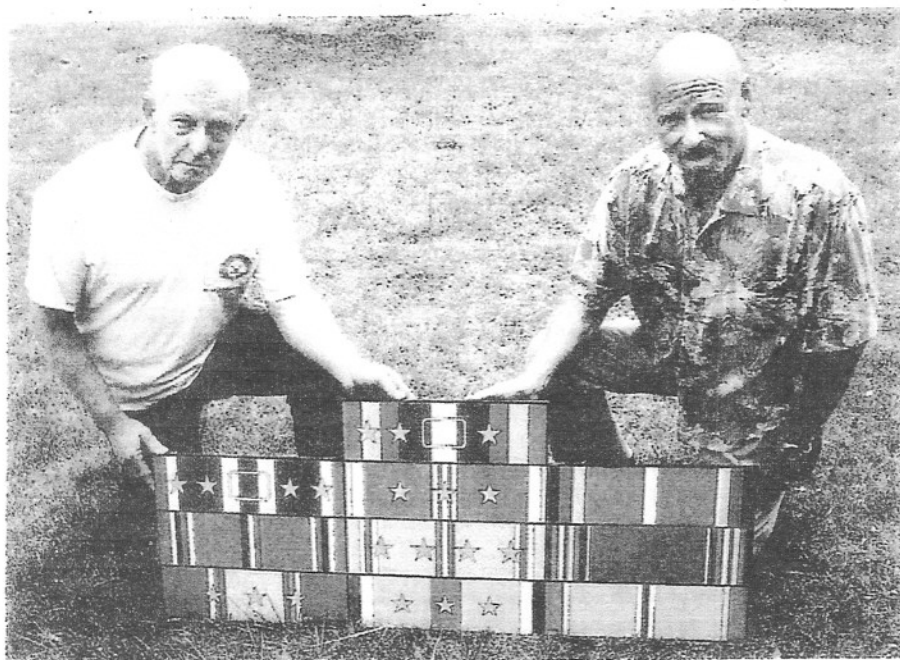
"Just the idea that I'm aboard a ship and almost back in the Navy brings back memories," he says. "But I'm afraid we've got a long way to go to bring her back."

An engineer, he recognizes engineering problems aboard and the difficulty in finding parts for such an old ship.

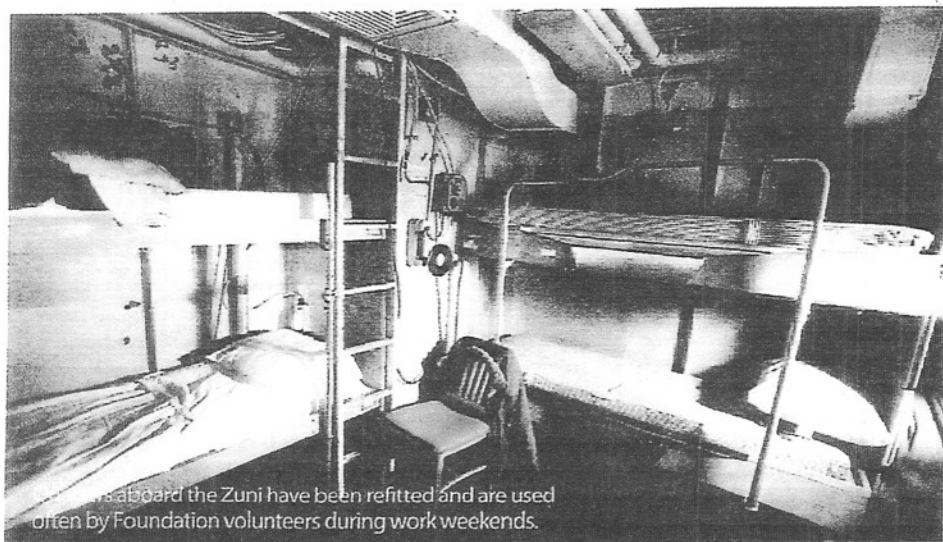
But like Jaeger, he also recognizes the Zuni's educational potential. He was aboard—and talking—recently when Chief Petty Officer Mitch Muehlhausen brought five of his Coast Guard shipmates aboard.

"The young guys want to know everything about the ship and its unique history," Doran says. "That's what it's all about—the education of younger people."

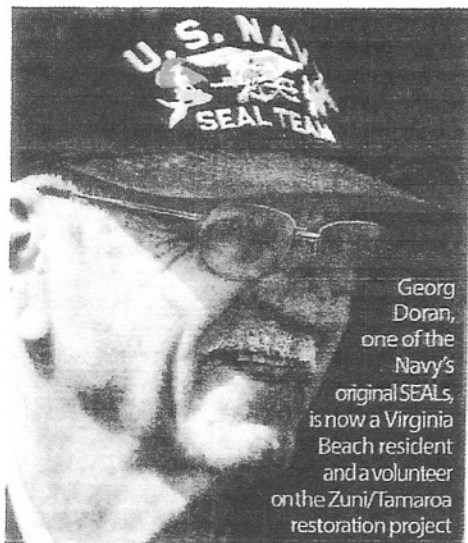
Muehlhausen, who lives in New Hampshire, knew his way around the ship. He served aboard the Tamaroa from 1990 to 1994 and was part of the rescue operation that was dramatized in the movie *The Perfect Storm*.



Harry Jaeger, operations manager, and Tom Robinson, director of public relations, of the Zuni Maritime Foundation with the Zuni's battle ribbons.



Bunks aboard the Zuni have been refitted and are used often by Foundation volunteers during work weekends.



George Doran, one of the Navy's original SEALs, is now a Virginia Beach resident and a volunteer on the Zuni/Tamaroa restoration project

helping to offload ammunition. Others remember later pouring bags of cement, "borrowed" from the Seabees, into the hull to plug the holes ripped by battle debris on the beach.

But Fox remembers being on the fantail with two other machinist mates when a larger ship was set to pull the damaged Zuni off Iwo Jima's Yellow Beach. Only a trip to the head and a quick galley stop for coffee saved his life that day. He remembers the inch and a half steel cable slipping, others remember it snapping. But when he was only six feet short of rejoining his two shipmates on the fantail the cable lashed out, hurling one of the sailors into the sea and wrapping the other around the cable, Fox says, like an old wet rag. The man died instantly.

The other man, Fox remembers, "was keeping afloat, hollering and screaming. Someone went in and drug him ashore but he died the next day."