

Ship's legacy could rise again

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Article :

In its heyday, the 115-foot USS High Point could track submarines and launch a torpedo while flying above the water at up to 50 knots.

It was the first in a series of four U.S. Navy hydrofoil vessels - "the lady of the fleet." And in 1974, it was the first of its kind to launch a harpoon missile, secretly testing and proving advanced anti-submarine technology.

After it was decommissioned in 1989, it quietly changed hands several times before coming to languish at Astoria's North Tongue Point around 2000.

Portland resident and military artifact collector Terence Orme rescued the ship from being scrapped in a 2005 lien sale. He has spent the past four years cleaning it out and drumming up support to revive the relic.

"They wanted to scrap it," said Orme. "I just thought that was a tragedy because it has such a great legacy. We had a different idea on preservation. Things have been slowly falling into place ever since then."

Orme and about a dozen volunteers - including three Navy vets who once served on board the ship - are working on weekends to restore the High Point and turn it into a floating museum.

On Saturday, Orme, his cousin Craig Orme, and Washington residents Jeff White and Al Carter cleaned refrigerators, polished the galley and pointed out all the work that still needs to be done.

They've improved the ship's cooling and fuel systems and the hydraulic steering, but the ship is missing its turbine engines and service diesel, without which it can't operate.

"We still have a lot of work to do," Orme said. "We're looking for some skilled people who have some vision of what we're trying to do."

What's a hydrofoil? Underneath the hull of the High Point are three wing-like structures called hydrofoils that are mounted on retractable struts. Once the ship reaches 23 knots, the foils lift it out of the water, reducing drag and improving speed.

"It travels much faster than anything else on the water," said Carter. "It's not as affected by the weather."

Built by Boeing Co. with a \$2.08 million Navy contract in the early 1960s, the High Point has two foils in the back and one in the front.

"It's a ship that flies," Orme said. "It has wings underneath."

It can also be propelled like a normal ship, he said, at slower speeds.

The ship was named after its birthplace in High Point, N.C., and delivered to the Navy at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in 1963.

On its foils, High Point was capable of patrolling the coast at high speeds, and was intended to track and chase

submarines. It had a 40-millimeter remote-control machine gun and carried out weapons testing in Puget Sound in 1966-74.

In 1973, it set a record for the fastest Columbia River bar crossing, cutting through 27-foot breakers on its foils at around 40 knots while the bar was closed to vessel traffic.

The High Point's success laid the foundation for the Navy's fleet of combat hydrofoils, Orme said, including six in the Pegasus class that were in service from 1977 to 1991.

"It was a really successful platform," he said, going on to explain how the Pegasus ship crossed the Panama Canal so quickly, it spooked the Panamanian government into implementing a speed limit.

Footprints, artifacts remainWhen Orme bought the High Point, it was full of trash, rotten carpeting and leaks.

In the pilothouse, there were gaping holes and loose wires where monitors and gauges used to be; same with the monitoring center for the missing turbine engines.

But traces of its glory days were evident throughout the vessel, in the footprints of weapons that once sat on deck, charts of testing routes and foils that lasted up to 10 hours, and artifacts of life on board.

"You can see where the torpedoes used to be," said Orme, standing on deck and pointing a row of angled lines.

Other discolored shapes and raised platforms denote the spaces where sensors were tied on lines and towed behind the ship on a sled to detect submarines and underwater mines.

"They would foil at high speed and drag the sonar sled behind," said Carter. "They had to be real quiet."

Below the deck, Orme pointed out, the ship still has "a round funny room" where a sonar trunk was lowered down through the ship.

Next to the round room are rows of decades-old computers.

"They needed three big racks of equipment to run the system," said White. "Now you can run it on your laptop - maybe even on your iPhone. Got an app for that?"

The team's restoration effort has turned up other clue about life on board the High Point, among them a cabinet full of mechanical fluid samples, a VCR manual, an ashtray, a bulletin board and a stapler.

"The ashtray is original," White said. "We have a picture of them smoking with that same tray."

They've also added some vintage items of their own, including some original High Point patches, plaques and pictures that Orme found on eBay.

They're piecing the story of the High Point back together through photographs and anecdotes from veterans who worked on board.

For example, they know the ship had a live-aboard cat for 12 years that loved to shred phone books and make other kinds of mischief.

The cat would crouch in the wires on the ceiling, Orme said, and one time knocked off the admiral's hat as he

was walking by.

"They never took any out," White said of the thick bundles of wires running along the ship's hallway ceilings. "They just put more in."

Volunteers needed What the restoration team needs more than anything is some skilled hands to help fix the ship's many mechanical problems, Orme said.

The Port of Astoria, which recently took control of the North Tongue Point Industrial facility, could help by providing a power hook-up at the dock, he said.

Orme said he's had some promising conversations with Rolls Royce about building new turbine motors for the High Point that would run more efficiently than the originals on a digital platform. And he lucked out when he found the ship's turbine manifolds - basically stainless steel tubes - in a scrap pile at the Port of Astoria's Pier 3.

He pointed to the holes in the engine room where the manifolds can be reinstalled.

"I bought this not really realizing what I didn't have," he said. "Finding the originals will make it a lot easier to install new turbines. Those are monumental things to have."

Insight from the ship's last chief engineer, Fred Nachbar of Shelton, Wash., has been guiding the restoration process, Orme said.

He has also had help from veterans Randy Tacey of Bremerton, Wash., and Sumi Arima, of Redmond, Wash., who ran the hydrofoil department for the Navy at one time.

Collecting stories and spending time with veterans who served on the ship has been a highlight of the effort, Orme said.

Veteran Dale Beresford told him about the day in 1966 during rough-water testing when the High Point crew found themselves being tracked by a Russian surface vessel.

"What's really great is being on the original High Point with other veterans watching World War II movies," Orme said. "The camaraderie that's developed with the vets and volunteers is really neat."

Every so often, vets and volunteers gather on the boat and watch movies in the galley, which is equipped with a large booth and a television with a VCR. One time they watched "Kelly's Heroes"; sometimes they put on "Victory at Sea" and let it run all day.

Orme is trying to start a nonprofit to oversee the restoration because, he said, "this is way too much for one individual to deal with."

But he's pledged to continue the effort regardless.

"What we'd like to do is be an active museum on the Columbia River," he said. "We'd like to be able to go to Rose Festival in 2012 to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the last time it was there."

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian The USS High Point, the first in a series of four U.S. Navy hydrofoils, sits at Astoria's North Tongue Point. Terence Orme, a military artifact collector from Portland, hopes to restore

the vessel that was built to track submarines.

Submitted photo

When Terence Orme of Portland bought the USS High Point at a lien sale at North Tongue Point in Astoria, the ship that was once “the lady of the fleet” was full of trash and had fallen into disrepair. This photo of the pilot-house shows holes where control panels used to be.