Saving Our Ships Newsletter

PROGRESS REPORT JANUARY 2023

The Christmas blizzard of 2022 unleashed the full force and fury of Mother Nature on much of the northeast United States and southeast of Canada. Winds gusting over 70 MPH, whiteouts, flash freezing, heavy sea swells within the harbor limits, and a 6-to-7-foot seiche all happening simultaneously with our ships near the epicenter.

The Naval Park staff worked feverishly to get all doors, hatches and scuttles buttoned up aboard ships, slacken the mooring lines and prepare our small fleet for what proved to be a truly generational storm.

We’re now assessing the full extent of the damage to the ships’ topsides and supporting infrastructure. The good news: all three ships remained afloat despite the worst the storm could dish out. The bad news: brows, debris barriers, supply lines, mooring lines, safety netting and more all sustained substantial damage. In addition, The Sullivans has sprung a minor leak possibly on her starboard side near an area that was patched during the April emergency, and perhaps elsewhere. As you read on, we’ll tell you what we’re doing about it.

MARINE SURVEY

In the days leading up to the storm, the marine survey of our three ships afloat was proceeding at a healthy pace. Joe Lombardi and his inspection crew had been moving through the ships and gathering the critical data needed to make informed repair recommendations. We’re happy to report that Joe is back aboard and has picked up where he left off. Much more to follow in the next newsletter.

WICKED WINDS

There was no hiding from the intense winds whipping across Lake Erie and into Buffalo Harbor. Knowing we had to be prepared for this historic storm, we covered recently renovated areas, intakes and topside weapons of PTF-17 with tarps or commercial-grade plastic coverings. When we were able to return to the park, we found the large tarp protecting the pilot house shredded and laying on deck, as well as cowling and guns exposed due to their coverings being tattered or torn completely away. We’ll have these areas recovered and protected from the next inevitable weather event – this is, after all, Buffalo!
INITIAL ASSESSMENTS

The first priority when we were able to return to the park after city driving bans were lifted was to assess the extent of damage to our ships, inside and out.

We took a systematic approach, starting with each topside deck. The port side of Little Rock took the full force of the storm as did the Croaker, while The Sullivans did benefit from being in the lee of her bigger sister. We found topside damage came in the form of torn safety netting, vent covers blown away and lost, stanchions near brows bent or torn away, deck damage and some surface hull damage as a result of the wind and swells pushing them violently into the mooring towers and bumpers.

Of immediate concern was a slight but apparent port list on the Sullivans, with her inclinometers indicating 2.6 degrees. She was also sitting noticeably higher at her bow. We carefully entered the ship and opened only watertight scuttles to access the interior, starting aft and working forward to inspect her spaces. We found a substantial amount of water had entered her engineering spaces, specifically B2 and B3 (forward engine room and after boiler room respectively), with depth measurements taken in her bilges at the centerline of B2 in excess of 34 inches and a comparable number in B3. We immediately notified Bidco Marine with whom we have a standing emergency flooding response agreement, and while this didn’t constitute an emergency, we wanted to be ready should conditions rapidly change.

We continue to investigate the source of the leak, and after samples were collected for lab tests of the water quality inside the hull and identified as being safe to do so, we’ve begun pumping out the affected spaces. We will identify the source of the leak and apply a temporary patch until a more permanent repair can be made.

Click on the image above for dramatic video of our ships facing the full force of the storm – the link will take you directly to our YouTube channel.

To the left: Using a yardstick to take frequent depth measurements during pumping at the centerline of the bilge in the aft boiler room.
As noted earlier, The Sullivans bow is sitting higher in the water than she was prior to the storm. After consulting with the local Coast Guard who informed us the bottom topography of Lake Erie may possibly have been altered as a result of the effects of extended, large wind-driven swells, it’s possible that the bottom of the harbor near and below our ships has also altered, with The Sullivans resting her bow on a new mound of silt. We are making inquiries to have a hydrographic survey conducted at the earliest opportunity to confirm if this is the case and, if so, how that could affect our ships.

The infrastructure that provides safe access to our ships was among the severest damaged as a result of the storm. The entire bottom section of stairs from the stern of The Sullivans to the Little Rock was torn away and fell into the harbor (we’ve since recovered the stairs and have laid them on The Sullivans deck to await future repair and reinstallation). In the image in the lower left corner, you can see the heavy cast aluminum mount for the ladder which was stressed to the point of sheering.

Other damage that effects the safety and security of our ships is the total destruction of the debris barrier that had surrounded our vessels and prevented large logs and other detritus flowing down the Buffalo River from coming in contact with the hulls of our ships or becoming trapped among them. We had mooring lines and cables stretch, fray, and completely part during the storm – those must be replaced as soon as possible.

We have a good many challenges in front of us to fully recover from the effects of the storm, but our staff is wasting no time in cleaning up, repairing, and seeking opportunities to improve our ships. We’re also extremely fortunate to have a growing number of skilled and passionate volunteers who bring much-needed energy to our efforts.

We’d been making great gains prior to the storm, and we intend to pick up exactly where we left off. It’s no less our commitment to provide a much-enhanced experience for our guests when they arrive to visit us again in the Spring – we very much look forward to seeing you again.
Our work on the Croaker has continued and, thanks to our volunteers Karl and Mario who’ve given up their personal weekend time, we’ve got 440V heaters installed – one in the forward torpedo room and one in the aft torpedo room. We’re awaiting delivery of the appropriate (and hard to find) fuses to finish the job, and for the first time the Croaker interior will have heat. We’ve also purchased a number of box fans to distribute the heat toward midships. Ship’s caretaker Jim will be able to continue his work and improvements under more hospitable conditions. Another motivation for getting these robust heaters operational is to prevent frost and ice from forming within the confines of the pressure hull, which could damage a wide variety of internal systems and structures.

As mentioned in last month’s newsletter, the Croaker Committee of our SubVets generously provided the funding for 6 deicing bubblers to position around the vessel. The Croaker’s exterior ballast tanks are vulnerable to the abrading effects of moving and compressing ice formations in the harbor, and this important measure will add to the layers of protection we’re adding. To date, we have 4 of the bubblers rigged and running, and we’re working on the appropriate power access for the remaining two, which will be installed forward near her fragile bow structures.

A 3/4 horsepower deicing bubbler installed and in operation near the port midships ballast tanks of the Croaker, pictured above.

Once the last 2 bubblers are in place and functioning, we’ll turn our attention back to enhancing displays within the vessel in keeping with our goal to enhance our guests experience. We’ve got some work to do in the Control Room and we’re excited about what we can achieve.

Stay tuned – 2023 should prove to be an exciting year for all our vessels, which should include longer-term repair planning for the Croaker.
Aboard The Sullivans, we’ve continued our work in testing the main bus tie (thick electrical cable) that connects the main electrical distribution panel in the aft engine room to the one in the forward engine room. We’ve applied heat tape at the aft connection to toast out any remaining moisture lingering from the incident this past April. We periodically test the line quality with a “Megger” to see if our efforts are moving us in the right direction. Ultimately, we intend to restore the ship’s inherent electrical distribution system.

In December, we were able to install and energize a 440V heater in the forward engine room (B2) and one in the aft boiler room (B3), which we’ve found to be the most vulnerable to frost and damaging ice. We also have installed 440V heaters in the aft berthing spaces and forward in the crew’s mess. The challenge is getting power to these units, as the new shoreside transformer has only three 440V outlets. We believe we can energize the aft 440V heater with the remaining unused outlet, and may be able to configure circuits in the temporary power panels to accommodate 220V heaters for the forward mess decks. Heat distributed throughout the hull at the waterline level is one of the measures we’re taking to protect the ship.

We also purchased 7 more robust 1 horsepower deicing bubblers which we’ve deployed around her hull. During the storm, one of the bubblers was lost when her lines and power cord parted, and another ceased functioning when her lines and power cord twisted in the violent wave action, causing what may be catastrophic damage to the unit.

Through the winter, our efforts to identify areas to repair and improve continue. The deck edge along the weather bridge below the grating is severely corroded to the point of structural failure. We’re currently examining options to restore the deck and welcome input from local metal workers and welders.

While the challenges may, at times, seem daunting, the truth is our staff and volunteers are passionate about The Sullivans and we’re excited about the possibilities. We’ve submitted a grant request, and have reason for optimism for a positive outcome that would provide the funding to restore the aft berthing spaces, including the safe removal of the badly deteriorated lead paint. We intend to restore the space in a way that will give guests the impression her sailors just left on their way to liberty ashore at some exotic port of call.

Most importantly, the marine survey of The Sullivans is nearing completion, and the first meetings in her repair planning are scheduled. We’re entering a critical time for the ship, and every person involved is focused on getting this right.

We’ve said it before, but 2023 will truly be an exciting time of change, opportunity and improvement for The Sullivans – stay tuned!
Our efforts in December aboard Little Rock continued at an aggressive pace. Ship’s preservation is always our first priority, and to prevent the copper fresh water supply lines from bursting near the aft heads as they had in years past, we installed a 440V heater, which now provides an abundance of heat.

The demolition of the aft male head is complete, and we’re securing the necessary funding for her modernization and rebuild. While the ship is an important artifact, the aging bathroom accommodations need to be brought to a more modern standard of reliability, accessibility and comfort. Additionally, improvements to her CHT system (sewage) throughout the ship are being planned and estimates obtained. This will improve our capacity for accommodations for our vibrant Encampment and Sea Cadet programs - critical areas in our mission to educate.

Another exciting area where we’ve made significant gains is the Admiral’s quarters. Through extensive research, we’ve located photographs of the space, which serve as our guide in conducting an historically accurate restoration. Much of the work is completed – better than 50% to date, and we anticipate having a grand opening celebration this Spring. Some of the enhancements we’ve completed are the installation of a hot water tank for use in the Admiral’s shower, allowing us to present opportunities to make this space available for an increasing variety of private and public events and uses. In the past, the space had been used for corporate events, wedding celebrations, and other exclusive uses. In the future, we’d like to add to the possibilities and share the elegance and historic significance of these spaces to a broader audience. We’re exploring the possibility of delicious dinners in the fashion of those enjoyed by dignitaries when visiting the ship, and even overnight stays. We have more details to work out, but there is much to look forward to.

A member of staff preparing the Admiral’s conference table for disassembly in preparation for the installation of new carpeting in the main conference space and sleeping quarters. When completed, the table can accommodate 16 guests comfortably.
The off-season is a time to put on my archivist hat and begin processing the collections and donations received throughout the year. The Buffalo Naval Park received 45 donations this year and as usual the breadth of artifacts is wide ranging. From a ship’s wheel to service records, uniforms to flags, it is evident that donors have trusted me and the Buffalo Naval Park to be the final place for their loved ones wide ranging memorabilia.

The first steps in the process include reviewing each item in a collection and tagging each item with its accession number. This will tie the collection to the donor form, which shares the same number. If all the items are of the same artifact type, they get filed and arranged with other collections. Many times, individual collections are diverse and there can be photographs, uniforms, and service records donated together. Using the accession number as a guide, these collections are separated as each item is filed and arranged with like items.

The archives at the Naval Park are slowly gaining cohesion. The goal is to straddle the principles of history and memory by providing contextual interpretation of the records for visitors to the Naval Park.
One thing has become abundantly clear after this past year of unprecedented challenges - we can’t be successful in fulfilling our mission of celebrating and sharing the stories of those who’ve served this magnificent nation without the extraordinary volunteers who’ve joined us. If you’re looking to join a phenomenal crew of passionate and committed volunteers, please consider the Buffalo Naval Park. Whatever your skill level or background, we’d love to have you join us.

Our ships afloat and the artifacts displayed at the Buffalo Naval Park have important stories to tell, and we invite you to help us share them.

**DOCENTS**
Our uniformed, trained cadre of docents are the guides and storytellers aboard our ships afloat. They know the histories, battles, sailors, and personal anecdotes related to these ships. If you’re interested in becoming a docent, we’d love to hear from you!

**MAINTENANCE**
If you enjoy working with your hands and have an interest in restoring rare artifacts so essential to American history, we’ve got an abundance of opportunities! We’re especially interested in having skilled metal workers, electricians, plumbers and carpenters volunteer with us, but all, regardless of skill level are welcome.

**COLLECTIONS**
Caring for and cataloging our unique artifacts takes a great deal of time, patience, and dedication. Under the direction of our curator, you could help preserve these precious objects so they’ll be available for future generations.

**EVENTS**
The Buffalo Naval Park is the premier location in all of Western New York to celebrate, participate and elevate. Making these events happen in a seamless, organized and timely way requires a committed staff of volunteers to help in setting up, promoting, staffing, organizing, and putting everything away after it’s all done so it’s ready for the next event.