PROGRESS REPORT
NOVEMBER 2023

November marks the end of our open tour season aboard our ships, thus ending an amazing year of events and onboard projects. We are so grateful to those who chose to spend time here with us over this past season, allowing us to share the important stories these ships and their crews have to tell.

We’ve got our list of winter projects and have already laid the groundwork to see them through to completion. One of the best parts of our job is to open an area of the ship that’s never been available to the public in the past and introduce it for the very first time to guests.

The harsh conditions of winter rapidly approach and we’ve been preparing our ships to face those conditions as best as our resources will allow.

The release of pledged funding continues to be challenging, but once received, we’ll be able to expedite the work critical to the safety of The Sullivans. Read on for more details.

THE BATTLE AGAINST TIME

All three of our vessels afloat have survived war, weather and stormy seas, but the ravages of time have by far wrought the greatest amount of damage. In the image to the right, a large chunk of The Sullivans superstructure steel, now so flimsy you can crush it in your hand, exemplifies the conditions we need to immediately address. This same level of degradation is present in the steel in many places in her hull and this fragile remnant of metal is, in those places, all that’s keeping the water from rushing in.

Part of our winterization process is the deployment of deicing bubbler units around the hulls of our ships. A powerful electric motor powers a propeller that agitates the water and prevents ice from forming. In the image to the left, one of the pre-deployed units can be seen on the port side of The Sullivans about 4 feet beneath the surface of the unusually clear water.
THE SULLIVANS SURVIVABILITY PROGRAM UPDATE

Throughout the month of October, Buffalo Naval Park ship’s staff have been working hard to chalk test, then replace all necessary gaskets in watertight doors, hatches and scuttles. It was a labor-intensive and time-consuming process that took many weeks to complete, but by the end of the month, it was done. There are some doors that have, for whatever reason, warped over the course of decades that will need further attention, and that’s where the funding for the Survivability Project comes in. The skilled metalworkers from Bidco Marine Group will come in and realign or straighten the doors so we can re-chalk test and have confidence the door will hold back a large volume of water in a flooding event.

Another critical area of work we’ve been preparing for is the reestablishment of watertight integrity of the transverse bulkheads, or the walls that run from the bottom of the ship up to the main deck. These walls create zones to prevent water from traveling freely throughout the ship, resulting in uncontrollable flooding and ultimately the loss of the ship. Aboard The Sullivans, this work is particularly tricky due to the poor state of the metal at the junction of the transverse bulkhead and hull plating in the bilges. Additionally, despite the ongoing efforts to clean and restore the interior of the ship, considerable oily residues remain, particularly in lagging and insulation in engineering spaces that would make traditional welding or hot work too dangerous to conduct safely.

After conferring with other marine experts, the solution decided upon is to carefully remove all oily residues in the areas in question, then apply an appropriate marine epoxy in the seams on both sides of the transverse bulkhead to strengthen that otherwise vulnerable area.

The challenge we face is again the timely release of designated funding. We have contractors standing by to complete the work, but the up-front capital needed is not yet available. Currently, our federal funding source is in a mandatory public comment period because the ship is positioned in Buffalo Harbor, a specific type of environmental zone. Even though all the work to be done in this phase is internal to the ship, the process is inflexible. If no unforeseen additional administrative delays occur, the earliest release of funds would be after December 14th, 2023. That represents a problem as the marine epoxy has a minimum cure temperature of 50 degrees, which will be dictated by the exterior water temperature of the harbor, which radiates through the steel of the hull and can’t be fully offset by controlling interior air temperatures.

Our best course of action under the current circumstances is to set a higher material condition, or damage control posture, which we’ve done. All watertight doors, hatches and scuttles are to remain closed and dogged down except when occupied by designated personnel. Once vacated, the affected entryway must be restored to a watertight condition. With the recent addition of a state-of-the-art flood detection alarm system, we will be able to react much more quickly, and with the stance described above, the water should have limited paths to follow, preventing a leak from becoming catastrophic.
Lots more progress aboard The Sullivans in October. The Survivability plan aside, our crew and volunteers have kept an aggressive pace of reclaiming and restoring important areas aboard ship.

Lighting aboard has taken a giant leap forward. Our lead technical volunteer Mario has done it again with restoring the ship’s inherent lighting in her aft main engineering spaces - no small feat considering these spaces were completely submerged in April 2022. To do that required removing the badly corroded fuse boxes, disassemble and clean them, test each individual circuit, and to be doubly sure, monitor the gradual reenergizing of the circuit with thermal imaging to detect potential hot spots.

Speaking of lighting, if you come by the park some pleasant Buffalo evening, you won’t help but notice the ship’s restored and tested Mediterranean lights – the ones strung over the top of the ship from one end to the other. Mario donned a harness and safety gear, and with the aid of staff members climbed her main mast to repair the light system rigging. As you can see in the picture at the bottom of this page, it’s truly a beautiful sight to behold. Each lightbulb had to be replaced with an appropriate exterior LED light bulb once the light string had been hauled all the way down to deck level, then hoisted back up when all was ready. You can decide for yourself, but we think this has a dramatic effect on the beauty of the entire Buffalo downtown waterfront.
In the image above and to the right, Tarzan of the Naval Park, or Mario as he is known in more formal circumstances, ascends The Sullivans main mast, restoring the Mediterranean lights to their former and now highly visible glory.
An important space aboard ship which we haven’t had the personnel or resources to tackle has been the fire control space in the after part of the ship, at the forward starboard side of the engineering berthing spaces. This area was among the worst affected by the partial sinking in April 2022.

In October, we started work to reclaim the space. First, we needed to establish safe power for lighting, then begin a comprehensive assessment process. We also needed to initiate active ventilation to dry out as much of the lagging and insulation as possible. We also began to carefully remove the top and side panels of the gun fire computers to assess the extent of the interior damage. Once opened, we were much relieved to find the internal systems nearly corrosion free – just in need of a major delicate cleaning. The interior precision gearings looked like a large Swiss timepiece, including a beautifully machined stabilizer or gyroscope.

Our plan is to stabilize the space, then begin cleaning and restoring incrementally. This will no doubt be a lengthy process, but we want very much to be able to share an accessible, restored fire control room and it’s unique equipment with the public.
As you will read in greater detail in the Curator’s Corner, we’re now in receipt of an additional Talos missile. Led by our Director of Collections Shane Stephenson, a group of volunteers arrived at Bidco Marine yard and did a great job cleaning, painting and covering for winter storage all the individual components of the missile and its associated warheads. Mark your calendars for late April or early May of next year when the missile is scheduled to be craned aboard the Little Rock and placed inside the missile house for display - a truly momentous and historic occasion.

We are so fortunate and grateful to have a group of Little Rock Association sailors and some of their family members join us for a week of work as they did last month - it’s amazing how much they accomplish in that time. A huge thanks to our increasing corps of volunteers who have been hard at work helping us preserve these precious vessels. The L3 Harris crew, led by our Docent extraordinaire Alan McLiverty and joined by a group from M&T Bank did a fantastic job painting the overhead on the Admiral’s weather bridge - no easy task. Well done!

The wonderful people at National Grid dedicated a day to work aboard and completely transformed the officer’s galley - cleaning, painting and organizing.

With our volunteers gaining significant ground on the above projects, the crew have started a major undertaking by restoring the original ship’s store - a key part of the ship’s active service story and a great way for the public to see how sailors lived and spent their money aboard. It’s a great deal of work, but we’re excited to bring back this otherwise lost piece of history. Shane is working on populating the store with period-correct items, consistent with what we found in photos of the space while in active use.

Another major project we’re working on is the restoration of Little Rock’s Mediterranean lights, the aft section of which has been out of service for some time. It’ll take some doing, but we’re hoping to make progress over the coming weeks.

Above: the Little Rock ship’s store being returned to its original condition. Right: fins and wings of the Talos missile arriving at the park.
A unique treasure that can be found throughout our ships is original sailor art. You can imagine young sailors forward deployed overseas with a little spare time on their hands and an artistic inclination picking up a paint brush (when their Chief wasn't looking) and decorating objects and spaces.

We’re very fortunate to have an abundance of such art, some a bit more risque than others, but all of it historically significant as its part of the fabric and personality of the ship. We’re discussing the possibility of creating a separate Sailor’s Art tour to share with our guests these unique creative endeavors, what they mean and what we might deduce about their respective creators.

Above: a piece of sailor art commonly referred to in the Navy as the ‘Deck Ape’, a sometimes affectionate and sometimes not so affectionate term used to describe the boatswain’s mates aboard ship. Boatswain mates are the grossly under-appreciated deck-plate workhorses of the fleet, chipping paint and doing much of the tougher labor so critically necessary to preserve the ships. This particular piece of art is not on the tour route, but deserves to be shared and understood much more broadly. If all goes to plan, we’ll be able to share this piece and much, much more with a specific curator-led tour - stay tuned for more information.

Above: two pieces of sailor art found in the missile house. On the left is a Naval officer version of the iconic Snoopy character, and on the right is Roadrunner from Looney Toons fame, apparently in a race with an outbound Talos missile. Wile E Coyote must have been otherwise occupied.
Dennis has been doing a great job volunteering aboard Croaker, keeping her clean and ship shape as we enter the winter maintenance period.

Due to lack of availability of the necessary technicians, the contractor for the boat’s flood detection system has yet to start work. As we’re hearing throughout the American economy, a general labor shortage is affecting this and many other important projects. The latest word is that work on the system will begin December 14th of 2023. We need to avoid any additional delays, if possible, since we’re entering into the winter season which brings exceedingly severe wind and weather conditions.

Winterization aboard the boat is proceeding to plan – 440V heaters in both torpedo spaces with fans distributed throughout the boat to spread the warm air as far as possible. Additional heat will be added in midships sections as resources become available.

We have dedicated deicing bubblers (thank you SubVets!) that we’re preparing to deploy. The challenge is to find a sufficient number of power sources on the boat that operate on independent circuits. When the boat was modified for use as a museum, alterations to her inherent power system placed limitations on how much draw could be expected. We’ve got some work to do but we think we’ve got a good and safe solution.
Work has continued aboard PTF-17 on the after gun and gun mount featuring some extraordinary restoration work by Joe, one of our volunteers who specializes in metal work.

Ryan has donated a small skiff, similar to the one carried aboard PTF-17 during her active service in Vietnam, which will be painted and placed aboard early next season.

Left: the Buffalo Naval Park’s newly released challenge coin for the 2024 season, commemorating PTF-17. Right: Chris Affuso (on the left) led a group of volunteers which resulted in a complete exterior restoration of the badly dilapidated Vietnam-era blue water Navy patrol craft. On the right, Ryan Jensen who worked with Chris throughout the project is taking the reins to see it through to its completion. Production of the coins was limited to 500, and Chris received coin number one, and Ryan coin number two - well deserved!
CURATOR’S CORNER

For this month’s newsletter, I’m offering a tiny glimpse into some of the work taking place since the Talos missile, booster and wing and fins have arrived from South Bend, Indiana.

None of this would be possible without the help of the US Navy Cruiser Sailors Association, who gifted us the money for purchase, transport, and eventual loading of the artifacts onto USS Little Rock. Their generous gift covered the full cost.

First work was to bring the 22 wings and fins received onboard the ship, gently clean them with soap and distilled water and to load them into the ready service trays. Happy to have the participation of a volunteer group made up of Physical Therapists through the WNY region who did the work on this!

It was then time to tackle the missile, and to gently clean it with soap and distilled water! I put out the call to volunteers and had eight come with me to Bidco Marine Group. You can see the good work with the before and after images. Next up will be the stabilization and preservation of the booster, which is in much rougher shape.

Please look for a future Special Edition newsletter dedicated to this work, the history of the Talos and its final placement aboard USS Little Rock.

Above and left: a series of photos showing the arrival of the wings and fins and crews carefully cleaning these historic artifacts.
JOIN US

While our season has wound down for 2023, our need for dedicated volunteers certainly hasn’t. Cleaning, preservation, collections and restoration work continues through all seasons, and we take the time we’re closed during the winter months to work on new displays and areas of the ships, so that each year brings new experiences for our guests.

If you’d like to contribute your time and expertise to our small fleet of historic vessels, we’d love to speak with you. Whether it’s basic cleaning or more complex electrical work, we’ve got a need for you. Please consider joining us.

DOCENTS/TOUR GUIDES: 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.

GARDENS AND GROUNDS: If you’ve visited the park, you’ve no doubt seen the immaculately maintained grounds enjoyed by so many. If you enjoy gardening and wish to be a part of this dedicated team, please let us know - we’d love to have you join us!

Online volunteer form: https://www.buffalonavalpark.wufoo.com/forms/z1jxfijq1uqolw0/
Email: info@buffalonavalpark.org
Phone: 716-847-1773
Website: https://www.buffalonavalpark.org
Buffalo Naval Park Youtube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/@buffalonavalpark