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The Ghost Ship Returns



"There's phosphorous in the ocean that glows when light shines through it at night. When you see this, think of it as their way of lighting up the way home for us," Felix Novelli told a shipmate. Over 60 years later memories came flooding back, writes JoANNE CASTAGNA

A 19-year-old plane captain at the time, Novelli was walking on aircraft carrier USS *Intrepid's* fantail towards the end of the war when he came across a sobbing shipmate – "What's wrong Mack?" he asked.

"I'm going home," his colleague responded – "Then you should be happy," said Novelli. The reply: "What about the guys we're leaving behind?"

Novelli thought about that before comforting the other sailor with his

vision of fallen comrades lighting the way home – fitting, as *Intrepid's* motto on setting sail was *In Mare in Caelo* (In the Sea in Heaven).

Perhaps it was his turn to be comforted when, after a two-year, bow-to-stern renovation, *Intrepid* came home in October to Pier 86 on the Hudson River with Novelli, now 83, and 230 other crew veterans aboard.

Pier 86 has been *Intrepid's* berth since 1982 when she was decommissioned

and became the *Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum*, receiving over 750,000 visitors each year and managed by the *Intrepid Foundation*, a charitable organisation started by the New York City-based Fisher construction and real estate family.

Intrepid is one of the most distinguished warships in US naval history, entering service during World War II and serving in the Pacific theatre, most notably in the Battle of Leyte

Plane Captain?

It's a title and duty, not a rank, given to trained ratings who are assigned to navy aviation squadrons aboard aircraft carriers

Plane captains like Felix Novelli spend at least 90 days learning the ins and outs and have their names and hometowns stenciled on the belly of an aircraft.

Their duties include working in a carrier's hangar and on the flight deck, making inspections, checking aircraft fluid levels, preparing the cockpit for flight and ensuring that there's no foreign debris on the flight deck that could cause any damage to the aircraft.

Navy plane captains tend to be some of the most junior personnel in the squadrons, but the responsibility can be enormous - the plane, pilot and mission can rest squarely on them.



*World War II victory party
- Felix Novelli's highlighted*



*Winning the war - Intrepid
launches her squadrons*



Gulf. Her prominent role in battle also earned her the nickname *The Fighting I* - and Novelli witnessed numerous attacks.

INTREPID'S HISTORY

"The sky blackened with Kamikaze. They wanted to sink a carrier and they kept on coming, left and right, 200 to 300 each day. She was hit five times by Kamikaze and a suicide bomber," he said.

Intrepid was called the

Felix Novelli (l) with Col Nello Tortora, commander of USACE New York District



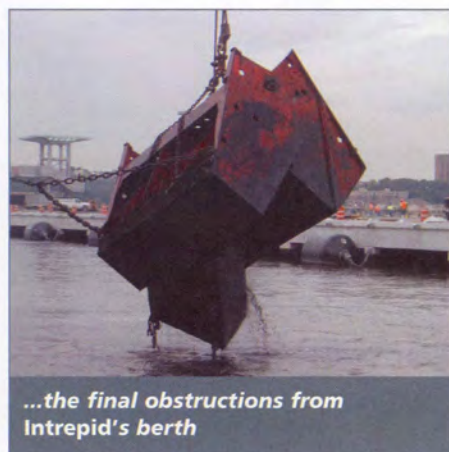
New York's fireboats salute her



At Pier 86, the US Army 511th dive team along with...



...Donjon Marine's grab dredger Newark Bay, clear...



...the final obstructions from Intrepid's berth

'Ghost Ship' by the enemy - not least because she arrived undetected in mid-February 1944 at the Japanese base of Truk where, with sister carriers, she sank two Japanese destroyers and 200,000 tons of merchant shipping in two days of almost continuous attacks.

The 282m-long carrier also saw action in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, tracked Soviet submarines during the Cold War and served as NASA's prime recovery vessel for Mercury and Gemini space capsules in the 1960s.

In 2006, the Intrepid Foundation decided to have the ship renovated and to rebuild Pier 86.

Novelli, who lives in Southampton, NY, believes the restoration - which cost \$120M (\$55M for the ship, \$65M for Pier 86) - is extremely important for future generations.

"Kids need to know what happened. Ninety-nine percent don't know what went on," he said.

Renovated parts of the ship include areas never seen before by the public, such as the lower decks where Novelli spent time with his shipmates. The forecastle, living quarters, machine shop and the museum's collection of aircraft have all benefited from the project.

But of course, there were snags ...

GLORIOUS MUD

In the summer of 2006, the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) New York District issued a federal permit to dredge a 'driveway' from *Intrepid's* berth to the Hudson River's main navigation channel, removing river mud that had accumulated around the ship.

With dredging completed, an elaborate *Intrepid on Leave* celebration was organised, public service agencies' vessels were invited to escort the carrier down river and seven tugs mustering 22,000kW began to pull the 27,100-ton *Intrepid* from her berth. She moved a whole 5m before all four propellers - each also 5m in diameter - dug into the sediment and created a compacted mud 'speed bump' under her fantail.

It took a multi-agency team - which included the US Navy's *Sea Systems Command* because of their unique knowledge and experience freeing large ships - to come up with a three-phase, \$3M dredging plan to remove the 39,000m³ speed bump. And with a deadline of just 29 days to the next high tide, they worked 24/7:

- The existing driveway was dredged deeper and wider with an access trench on the south side of *Intrepid's* stern to beyond her trapped propellers and shafts
- An underwater plough was used to drag mud from under the stern, and
- Remaining sediment was removed from under the ship's fantail.

And in December 2006, after fighting high winds and swift currents, tugs supplied by McAllister Towing



Home in time for Christmas

towed the carrier down river for her restoration in yards at New Jersey and Staten Island.

FAST FORWARD

Two years later, it was time for *Intrepid's* grand return journey - and to get her back, the multi-agency team joined forces once again.

Intrepid has a near 10m draught and USACE surveyed the 10 mile route for any obstructions, calling in US Army divers to help. In addition, contractors DonJon Marine - who'd been involved in the dredging plan to free the carrier in 2006 - were hired to dredge the Hudson River Channel and adjacent areas, as well as clear pier 86's berth area. Donjon's grab dredger *Newark Bay* removed the final obstructions just days before *Intrepid's* scheduled homecoming.

And so, on a cool gusty day, led by the US Coast Guard and USACE harbour workboats - and towed by the same McAllister tugs that freed her two years before - *Intrepid* sailed from Staten Island up the Hudson to the rebuilt pier 86.

City fireboats sprayed streams of water - some of it dyed red and blue - as the historic ship passed the Statue of Liberty before pausing at Ground Zero, where vets unfurled a giant American flag in salute to those lost on 9/11.

With the New York Police Department buglers playing *Taps* and the band playing the *Navy Hymn*, Novelli stood on the same deck he did 60 years ago as his lost comrades lit the way home.

FINALLY...

The *Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum* reopened to the public on 8 November. So if you happen to be in New York at Christmas

More info at www.intrepidmuseum.org

About the Author

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