



## Pensacolans ready to dive the 'Mighty O'

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by MELISSA NELSON

**PENSACOLA, Florida (11 Feb 2006)** -- The "Mighty O" saw action in Korea and Vietnam and was home base of U.S. Sen. John McCain before he was taken captive by the North Vietnamese, but the aircraft carrier's greatest fame could come when it's on the ocean floor.

If all goes according to plan this summer, explosives will be placed throughout the largely hollowed-out shell of the USS Oriskany and it will plummet 210 feet to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico.

But first, it has to get back to Pensacola from its hurricane-season mooring with the U.S. Maritime Administration's Beaumont Reserve Fleet southeast of town, which also had been its home from 1999 to early 2004 while its fate was being decided.

Hurricane-weary Pensacolans are counting on the Navy's long-delayed sinking of the Oriskany to resurrect their city's slumbering tourism industry. The ship, featured in the films "The Bridges of Toko Ri" and "The Men of the Fighting Lady," would become the world's largest intentionally created man-made reef, drawing divers worldwide.

But nothing has gone according to plan since the Navy announced Pensacola's selection for a program to reef old warships two years ago. Hurricanes, EPA permitting problems, even the death of a lead project scientist, have contributed to delays in the ship's sinking.

Many Pensacolans are jaded about the Oriskany, which was first towed to Pensacola in December 2004, only to be towed back to Texas in June 2005 to ride out the 2005 hurricane season.

In a May 2005 Enterprise story, Pat Dolan, public affairs officer for the Naval Sea Systems Command in Washington, D.C., was quoted as saying the Oriskany was being sent back to Beaumont because there was no mooring in Pensacola tough enough to hold the giant ship in case of hurricane-force winds and waves, which it endured as Hurricane Rita came screaming into Southeast Texas.



USS Oriskany

A much-touted 2004 Florida State University study estimated Escambia County would see \$92 million a year in economic benefits from an artificial reef - a cash infusion desperately needed in an area hard hit by hurricanes.

"Just the draw on the sinking alone could do more for our economy than any other single event has been able to do," said Robert Turpin, director of Marine Resource for Escambia County and the person who brought the Oriskany to the attention of local planners.

"This would be a very, very bright spot after a gloomy couple of years. But I hope I'm not jinxing anything by saying that."

More than 2,500 Oriskany veterans made plans to come to Pensacola for the first scheduled sinking in the summer of 2004. The city invited McCain as the keynote speaker. But the sinking was delayed by EPA permitting problems and Hurricane Ivan, which slammed Pensacola's coastline that fall.

"I cannot imagine a greater disappointment than not getting the Oriskany this year. Our people have invested financially, emotionally, in so many, many ways they have invested themselves in the Oriskany," said Ed Schroeder, tourism director for the Pensacola Bay Area Chamber of Commerce.

At a Pensacola Mardi Gras parade on Feb. 25, Phillips, the MBT Dive Shop owner, will again

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"A lot of people just want to see this thing in the water," said Jim Phillips, owner of MBT Dive Shop in Pensacola. "We can talk until we are blue in the face but until the EPA issues the permit, it isn't going to happen."

Sinking the Oriskany before the start of the 2006 hurricane season hinges on the EPA issuing a permit this month declaring the Navy has met the agency's criteria for removing contaminants known as PCBs or polychlorinated biphenyls.

If the permit comes through, the Navy will tow the Oriskany from Beaumont back to Pensacola and the three-month process of preparing the ship for sinking can begin.

Capt. Larry Jones, head of the Navy's inactive ship program, told an auditorium of anxious Pensacolans in January the prospects of seeing the ship underwater this summer look good.

"I know you want (the Oriskany) and I want you to have it," he said to cheers from the crowd. Audience members offered hundreds of letters in support of the sinking at the EPA hearing.

If the Oriskany goes down as planned, 23 ships that are part of the Navy's inactive fleet could become eligible for sinking.

The cost of the Oriskany project to date is \$12.7 million - more than four times the \$2.8 million Congress appropriated in 2003 to dispose of the ship. Jones defended the price tag, saying the \$2.8 million was never intended to fully fund the pilot program. And he noted reefing is a much less expensive alternative to scrapping, which could cost \$24 million.

It's the money the Oriskany would bring once it's under the water that has Florida Panhandle business owners anxious to see the ship on the ocean floor.

display a 40-foot-long plywood Oriskany float, complete with a rotating radar antenna, that he built three years ago. He said the float is a sign of his optimism that that real Oriskany will eventually return to Pensacola.

Others are less optimistic.

"I've had a lot of people ask me ... 'Can we go ahead and sink the float instead?'" Phillips said.

Eilene Beard, a dive shop owner and Pensacola native who donated \$25,000 in retirement savings to help the community promote the Oriskany project, believes she will dive the real thing this year.

"From the moment she goes down, she'll create sounds in the water and the sandstorm that she will cause will draw fish that want to see what it is. It will begin to attract life immediately," Beard said. "We have had calls from England, Germany, Japan, Thailand. They are all ready to dive the Oriskany."

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