



Perspectives Perspectives

Paying the *Hero* a visit

By Cara Sucher
Special to the Sun

Driving down the coast of Oregon this summer, I decided to make a stop in Newport. I had heard a piece of Antarctic history was moored there, and after five seasons at Palmer Station I was more than a little curious.

In my mind, the wooden-hulled 38-meter *Hero* was almost mythical. Named after the ship captained by 1820s sealer Nathaniel B. Palmer, the *Hero* served as the primary U.S. Antarctic Research Program vessel from 1968-1985. The *Hero* is legendary for its tight quarters and rough crossings. Some of our current Palmer researchers experienced their first taste of the Antarctic on the *Hero*. Ask the right questions and stories about the ship and the colorful Dutch Capt. Pieter Lenie abound.

As I drove through the narrow streets toward the waterfront, I wondered if I would be able to find the ship. I figured I could ask around and eventually come across her, probably in the back of some derelict boatyard. I needn't have worried. Sitting regally at the first dock in Newport Harbor was the *Hero*, a big sign draped across her side proclaiming in large capital letters, "HISTORIC RESEARCH VESSEL." It would have been impossible to miss the green-hulled ship if you tried.

Because she was so prominently located and proudly decorated, I decided to head down the dock for a closer look. Although she wasn't in tip-top shape, she still looked mostly as she did in her research days. The bridge, the pilot house above it, and the rigging were all the same. The wooden workboat, *Heroine*, and two small dories were missing, but the red sails were still there.

A friendly, grey-haired man working on deck saw me and waved. We started chatting, and he invited me onboard. He was Bill Wechter, a retired U.S. Coast Guard navigator and commercial fisherman — and the *Hero's* current owner. He has owned many vessels, but none, he says, as interesting or with such a rich history as the *Hero*.



Photo by Cara Sucher / Special to The Antarctic Sun
The historic *Hero*, now a private ship, sits in dock in Newport, Ore.

Bill apologized for the mess, explaining he was finishing some repairs. He asked if I wanted a tour, even though the power was out and he was removing some nasty interior insulation in the ceiling above the dining room.

We went inside the main deck, visiting the captain's quarters first. Unbelievably, it was almost exactly as Capt. Lenie might have left it. The bed was made, his issue bag held cold weather gear, and original files filled the shelves and drawers. An old typewriter sat against one wall, and a clipboard with a list of requisitions hung on the other. Antarctic stickers covered the doorway.

As we climbed down the steep stairway and walked through the lower deck, I was amazed at how many other original items remained from the vessel's research days. The labs still had microscopes, test tubes and chemicals for developing pictures; the galley was filled with pots, pans and other utensils; the fo'c'sle, or forward part of the upper deck, had shelves full of spare motor parts; and the communications room had lists of radio call signs for contacts in the Antarctic and the United States.

Bill recounted the *Hero's* post-Antarctic history. The National Science Foundation put her up for auction in 1985. Some folks from Reedsport, Ore., were interested in starting a floating restaurant, but realized she was better suited to be an Antarctic museum. The Port of Umpqua in Reedsport purchased the ship and raised money for an elaborate Antarctic center with the *Hero* as a major attraction. Eventually visitors could tour the ship, but the center itself never came to fruition.

About 10 years later, the foundation that owned the *Hero* ran into money problems and the ship was put up for auction again. The high bid, around \$40,000, didn't pan out. After a bit of legal wrangling, the *Hero* went to the next highest bidder, Bruce Norris, for \$5,000, and she sailed to Rainier, Ore. In 1998, family health problems led to the sale of the *Hero* once again, this time to Bill.

Bill sailed the ship to Portland and put her into dry dock for repainting and recaulking. In April 2000, he sailed the *Hero* to her current location. He hopes to sail her to Victoria, British Columbia, this summer for more extensive dry dock work.

Although the *Hero's* future is unknown, it is clear Bill wants to preserve the ship in a way that will honor her place in Antarctic history. Whether it be as a museum, a bed and breakfast, or as a tour ship, I don't know. But I do know that I am optimistic. The *Hero* represents a different era, one where Antarctica was still a faraway place, where you couldn't pick up a phone and call home or log onto a computer and read any newspaper in the world. And that's an important perspective to remember.

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Photo by Cara Sucher / Special to The Antarctic Sun
The former research ship, the *Hero*.