

Maritime museum seeks funds for gunboat study

By JOHN FLOWERS

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FERRISBURGH — The Lake Champlain Maritime Museum (LCMM) is seeking \$100,000 for the final studies it needs before recommending a preservation plan for the Revolutionary War-era gunboat Spitfire that remains docked in its watery grave at the bottom of the lake.

And one of the tools the LCMM will use to try and raise the needed funds will be a short film — currently in the final stages of production — that tells the history of the Spitfire and its 1997 discovery in the depths of Lake Champlain. Art Cohn, executive director of the LCMM, said plans call for the film to be aired on Vermont Public Television later this year.

“We’re trying to move this (preservation) plan forward,” Cohn said last week. Preservation options range from safeguarding the gunboat at its current undisclosed location, or undertaking the extraordinary task of raising it for eventual public display.

Museum officials have spent the past 11 years carefully crafting a plan for the Spitfire, one in a small fleet of gunboats commanded by Benedict Arnold during the Battle of Valcour Island on Oct. 11, 1776. All of Arnold’s boats, except the New York, were destroyed by the British, captured or scuttled by the Continental Army. While British forces won the battle, Arnold’s forces damaged the British fleet enough to send it back to Canada to regroup, thereby giving the Americans time to galvanize their own forces for a winning war effort.

The well-preserved remnants of the Spitfire were discovered by LCMM staff during an underwater mapping survey of Lake Champlain in 1997. Its discovery drew international attention, and — at least initially — a steady stream of financial support from the U.S. government for studies into how the gunboat should be protected for future generations. LCMM officials note that time is of the essence, as zebra mussels and other invasive mollusks continue to affix themselves to archaeological treasures in the depths of Lake Champlain.

Cohn said the museum has identified five final studies needed before a final preservation recommendation for the Spitfire can be made to the Navy Historical Center, the federal agency working with the LCMM on the project. Unfortunately, according to Cohn, the LCMM has been unsuccessful during the past two years in securing from the federal government the \$100,000 it needs to commission the final five studies.

“We are told that the military is having some obvious demands on its resources,” Cohn said, noting the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. “We have also looked into private foundations and other funding avenues open to us.”

The remaining five studies will focus primarily on the logistics and financial implications of raising the Spitfire, Cohn said. Studies focusing on preservation of the shipwreck site have largely been completed, he noted.

“In an ideal world, we would’ve completed these studies and been in a position to make a recommendation last year,” Cohn said of recent funding delays.

David Carle, spokesman for Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said the Department of Defense has decided not to fund the Spitfire project this year, saying that it “does not have sufficient military value.” Carle said from the start, there has been some resistance in the Pentagon in recognizing the historical importance of Lake Champlain in U.S. Navy history, that there could be some “blue water bias” because this project is inland, and not at sea.

Leahy, Carle said, has always made a strong case about the vital role that Lake Champlain played in the Revolutionary War and in the earliest days of the U.S. Navy, including the decisive 1814 American victory at Plattsburgh Bay with ships largely built in Vergennes. He has also noted that the first boats of the U.S. Navy were built on the shores of Lake Champlain in Whitehall, N.Y.

“He will be driving these points home again when he next meets with Navy officials about the project,” Carle said. “A briefing from the Legacy program staff is in the works about their views on the project. (Leahy) will also be working to try to budge the Defense Department to be more cooperative.”

“We might not even have a U.S. Navy today if not for the skill and bravery of the crews on those gunboats on Lake Champlain,” Leahy said. “They bought crucial time for the Americans to build strength. Art Cohn and the Maritime Museum are doing a superb job of preserving and documenting that rich history.”

Museum officials will continue to pursue all funding sources to bankroll the last five studies. They are banking on a new film to keep the Spitfire on the minds of potential contributors. The 30-minute documentary will, in Cohn’s words, “really lay out the issues, challenges and opportunities surrounding this shipwreck management project.”

The documentary will feature footage from a 2006 inspection of the shipwreck; the threat to the Spitfire posed by invasive mollusks; interviews with people who discovered the gunboat; and an explanation of the role the vessel played in the nation’s quest for independence.

“We’re days away from a final draft (of the film),” Cohn said. “We will submit it to Vermont Public Television and have a dialogue on how and when it will be used.”

Cohn added plans call for the film to be shown regularly at the museum this spring and summer.

While Cohn is disappointed funding has not fallen into place to complete studies for the Spitfire, he understands that the preservation of shipwrecks is still a relatively new concept that is being defined at a time when resources are thin.

“Shipwrecks are new to the table,” Cohn said. “I’m not surprised it is taking a little bit of time to sort this out.”