



For Immediate Release:
June 8, 2011

Historic World War II Minesweeper Calls in Kodiak, Alaska

All eyes were on the 181-foot Helenka-B as she rose out of the water in the straps of Kodiak Boatyard's mammoth Marine Travelift. It was easy to see there was something different about her. Her broad, flat bottom and shallow draft was a mark of her heritage as a WWII era fighting ship.

The former Navy minesweeper and veteran of three wars was the 75th vessel to use Kodiak's new boatyard, and the longest since the city opened the yard in October, 2009. The M/V HELENKA-B called in Kodiak for a Coast Guard inspection and routine bottom maintenance.



She has a long and colorful history. Before being converted to a landing craft for service in Alaska, the ship had a distinguished war-time record, earning 13 battle stars. The vessel's original name was the USS SURFBIRD. Designated ADG-383, she was built in 1944 on Lake Erie for the U.S. Navy by the American Shipbuilding Co.

The hull is riveted steel and was one of the first steel ships designed as minesweeper. She later was equipped to serve as a "degaussing services" vessel. Degaussing negates the magnetic signatures of metal ships and thus makes them safer when encountering magnetically influenced mines. ADG-383 earned three battle stars in World War II, two in the Korean War, and eight for service in Vietnam where she acquired her nick name "Lady of the Orient."

USS SURFBIRD was decommissioned in 1970 and sold to Sam R. Brice in 1975. Brice added a bow ramp, cargo deck, installed conventional drive diesel engines and made major modifications. He removed the superstructure and shortening her by 50'. She was renamed the after Sam's wife Helenka Brice of Fairbanks, Alaska.



Today, the M/V HELENKA-B routinely plies the waters of Cook Inlet transporting freight and heavy equipment for a variety of customers including the oil and gas industry. Her shallow draft makes access possible to remote locations that have no dock.

The HELENKA-B tipped Kodiak's Marine Travelift scales at 410 tons. Maximum capacity is 660 tons. Most vessels lifted in Kodiak's boatyard are crabbers, draggers, and long liners averaging about 100 feet and weighing 250 to 350 tons. The heaviest lift to-date was the 136-foot F/V Provider, a crabber at 590 tons.

Kodiak's Travelift is the largest mobile marine hoist north of San Diego and is one of only eight in the world. Kodiak's boatyard can simultaneously accommodate seven large vessels and features an environmentally acceptable wash-water filtering system. This means that no paint or oil contaminates are released to the ocean when the hull is cleaned and prepared for antifouling paint.

Captain Bruce Flanigan is justifiably proud of his unique and historic vessel. This fall he plans to replace the cargo deck and the supporting stringers. According to the USCG inspector, the riveted steel hull is in excellent condition considering the age of the vessel.

Flanigan and his crew performed routine bottom painting and replaced zinc anodes during the vessel's week-long stay in Kodiak. Pleased with the service he received in Kodiak, he departed saying, "I'll see you again next year." The M/V HELENKA-B is homeported in Homer, Alaska and is owned by Alaskan Coastal Freight.

You can learn more about the historic USS SURFBIRD 383 on line at www.surfbird383.org or at www.alaskancoastalfreight.com. The Surfbird Association is having a reunion September 21 - 25, 2011, in St. Louis, Missouri. The association's web site includes this spirited quote: "Any ship can be a minesweeper...once!"

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