

Dead Seabirds' Trail of Oil Leads to Cement Ship

Seacliff Wharf Closed as Oil is Extracted from Submerged Tanks

by Michael Thomas

The crumbling hulk of Seacliff's cement ship is normally off limits to people, left as a refuge for seabirds. But this month, salvage crews have bolted covers on the gaping holes in the SS *Palo Alto*'s decks, making it safe to walk on. They've hauled in diving gear, submersible cameras and pumps to extract hidden oil deposits that have killed dozens of seabirds over the past two years.

The work began on Aug. 28. On a recent morning, curious seals popped their heads from the water as a diver wearing a large steel helmet emerged with a sample of the oil.

Officials aren't sure how much oil, or bunker fuel, remains in the ship's tanks, but what has been found so far is in the offshore section of the ship that is broken and mostly sunk.

As a result, extraction will be a complicated task, and spill containment floats and absorbent pads are at hand in case the oil leaks to the surrounding tidelands.

The discovery that oil still remained in the ship after 76 years resting off Seacliff beach resolved a mystery that emerged in September of

2004, when oily seabirds first washed ashore nearby.

Dozens of Seabirds Have Died

In late 2004, 22 cormorants were found with oil contamination, and the toll on ocean wildlife has mounted since then. By the time cleanup work began, 24 dead cormorants and another 55 live, oiled seabirds had been found. Among them were 31 Brandt's cormorants, one double-crest-

ed cormorant, 10 endangered brown pelicans, two Western gulls and a Heermann's gull.

"In the last couple months, we've found about nine brown pelicans," said John Sutton of the Department of Fish and Game's Office of Spill Prevention and Response (OSPR). "That was a real concern because of their special listing [as endangered birds]."

The live birds were all taken to a wildlife facility in Cordelia,

but only 19 of them could be rehabilitated and returned to the wild. Samples of oil from their feathers were sent to the State's Petroleum and Chemistry Laboratory for analysis.

"We came up with a 'fingerprint' that matched all the birds to the same source of oil," Sutton explained.

Then the search for the source began. Oil from a natural seep south of Monterey was ruled out. Investigators tried to

determine if a passing ship had pumped out oily bilge water, but came up empty handed. The cement ship was becoming a more likely culprit, but OSPR staff still explored every other possibility.

"We looked at historical shipwrecks," Sutton said. "They were quite a ways out. We came up with nothing that was really in the vicinity of Seacliff State Beach."

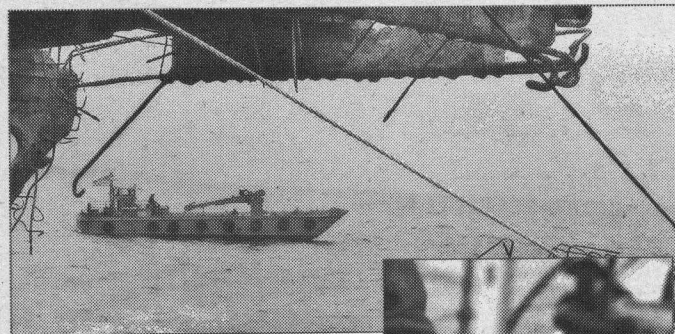
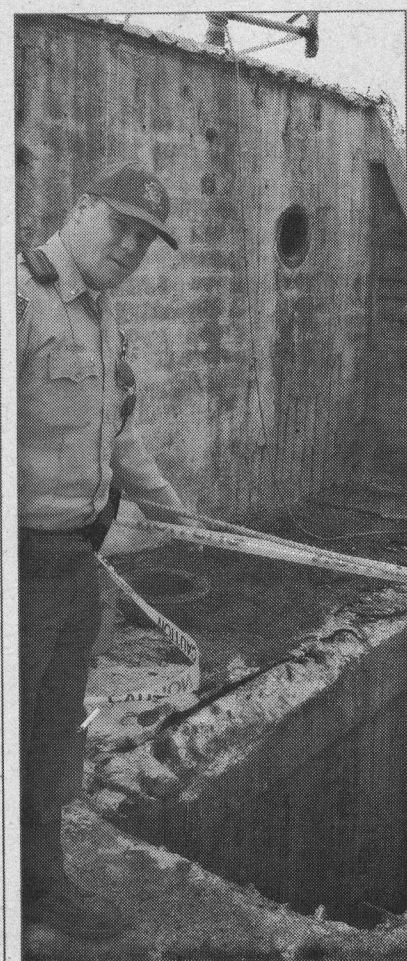
So OSPR staff and Coast Guard personnel turned to the *Palo Alto*.

During low tide hours, snares with absorbent fibers were lowered into gaping holes in the ship's decks. Oil was found and the state lab matched it to the "fingerprint" associated with all the recovered seabirds.

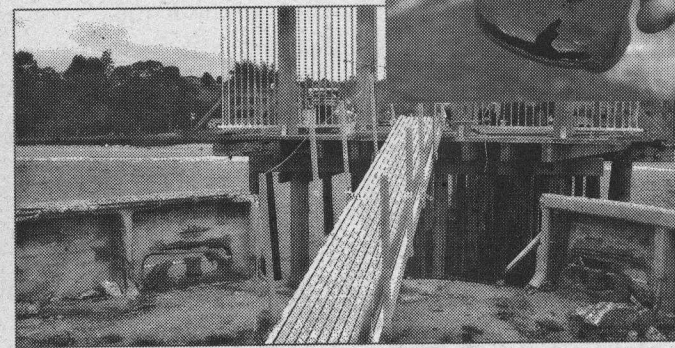
Funding Problem Delayed Cleanup

By the summer of 2005, OSPR and Coast Guard officials had pinpointed the *Palo Alto* as the source of the oil, but cleanup was delayed for more than a year because it didn't qualify for funds that are normally limited to spill cleanup.

This year, funding for the \$1.8 million project was secured from another state account that is fed by a fee on oil imports. For every barrel of oil that arrives at the state's



Clockwise from L: OSPR's John Sutton indicates the location of a possible oil deposit; a spill response vessel waits nearby; sample of recovered oil; access ramp to the normally-closed ship.



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ports, 5.5 cents is collected to pay for spill prevention.

Titan Maritime, a Florida-based salvage company, was hired to do the work. For Titan, the *Palo Alto* cleanup is a relatively small project. The company has dragged massive cargo ships from rocks and

Navy in 1919. The war ended before the *Palo Alto* could be put into service, and it was mothballed in Benicia until 1930, when investors bought it and towed it to Seaciff.

It was deliberately sunk there to create a seaside entertainment attraction. A winter storm soon shattered its hull, ending its short life as a tourist attraction. In 1936, State Parks acquired the ship for \$1 and made it part of the State Beach.

In 1958, its crumbling concrete decks were closed to the public, but the pier leading to the ship remains a popular spot for fishermen.

Today, crews are probing for oil using historical schematics of the *Palo Alto*'s sister ship, the *SS Peralta*. The *Peralta* is currently being used as a breakwater for a lumber mill in British Columbia. In addition to visiting the *Peralta*, OSPR and Titan were able to obtain the original schematics of the sister ship.

"This ship has over 70 different tanks, from very large ones to small size tanks," Sutton explained. "We are focusing on the forward area because we think that's where most of the oil is. There are two to four [tanks] that may have oil."

Wildlife officials generally presume that only 10 percent of the birds impacted by an ocean spill are ever found. Oil destroys the insulating properties of their feathers, so most die of hypothermia and drown at sea. When work began this fall, workers immediately found more evidence of the oil's impact. According to Sutton, another

55 dead oily birds were found in the ship's tanks and on its decks.

Sutton says they have no idea how much oil will be pumped out of the ship. Whatever is removed will be sent to a recycling facility in Washington state.

When the cleanup is fin-

ished, barriers will be installed to prevent birds from re-entering suspect areas of the ship. The fiberglass panels won't be visible to the public and the appearance of the cement ship won't be altered.

Sutton hopes the whole process will be wrapped up by Oct. 1. Because much of the

work is taking place in submerged portions of the ship, progress is dependent on good weather and tide conditions.

Regardless, officials plan to have the cleanup completed and the pier reopened in time for the annual Marc Monte Foundation Fireworks show on Oct. 14. ■



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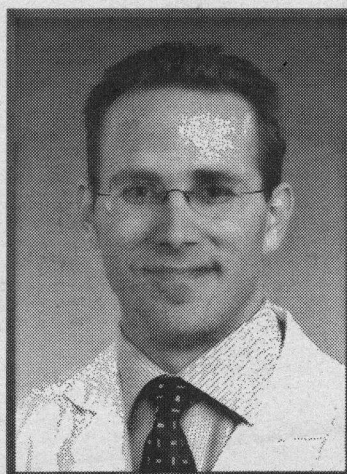
reefs worldwide. In 2002, Titan extracted 85,000 gallons of bunker oil from the *Jacob Luckenbach*, which sank in 1953 offshore from the Golden Gate Bridge. Hundreds of seabirds had been killed by leaks from the *Luckenbach*.

Titan also helped to raise the remains of the H.L. Hunley, a Civil War era submarine recovered in 2000.

Historic Ship Won't Be Altered

Seaciff's cement ship was one of 12 concrete vessels built as an oil tanker by the U.S.

We'd like to introduce...



Jason Luksich, M.D.

Ophthalmology

A native of Santa Cruz, Dr. Luksich comes from the Wake Forest University Eye Center, North Carolina, where he completed his internship. He received his BS in biochemistry from Cal Poly and decided to pursue a career in medicine after serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji where he taught mathematics and chemistry to high school students.

He completed his medical degree at St. Louis University School of Medicine and his preliminary medicine internship at Alameda County Medical Center in Oakland.

He has a special interest in no stitch topical cataract surgery. He speaks conversational Spanish after living in Mexico for two months and working at a health clinic for two years.

Dr. Luksich and his wife will make their home in Santa Cruz. He looks forward to making new friends and to establishing his medical practice in his hometown.

Hau T. Nguyen, M.D.

Ophthalmology

Dr. Nguyen graduated with highest honors in biology from the University of California, Davis. She completed her medical degree and internship at the University of California, Irvine and her residency at Louisiana State University.

She also served as a Glaucoma Fellow at the Devers Eye Institute in Portland, Oregon this past year.

Her areas of specialization include glaucoma management and therapeutics, cataract and glaucoma surgery.

She speaks medical Spanish, is fluent in Vietnamese, and looks forward to establishing her practice in Santa Cruz.



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