The story of the U.S. Navy fleet tugboat USS Zuni – believed to be the last vessel afloat that participated in the Battle of Iwo Jima and later rechristened the US Coast Guard Cutter USCGC Tamaroa for additional 40-plus years of service at sea – begins in the midst of World War II.

The Cherokee-class tug nicknamed “The Mighty Z” was laid down March 8, 1943 at Portland, Ore. by the Commercial Iron Works and launched July 31, 1943. She was named for the Zuni, after a tribe of Pueblo Indians indigenous to an area around the Zuni River in central New Mexico.

Cherokee class tugs, originally known as Navajo class, were built for the Navy prior to the start of World War II. They were much more capable of extended open ocean travel than earlier fleet tugs due in large part to their 205-foot length, 38-foot beam and substantial fuel-carrying capacity. They were also the first large surface vessels in the US Navy to be equipped with diesel/electric drive. Of this class tug, 28 were built, with the Zuni the last of the line.

From the time of her commissioning, Zuni was underway 80 percent of the time, earning four battle stars for her World War II service. Her skipper, Lt. Ray E. Chance, was awarded the Legion of Merit by Admiral William Halsey. Among Zuni’s many wartime missions were urgent orders Nov. 3, 1944 to aid a light cruiser, USS Reno, which had been torpedoed by Japanese submarine I-41 in the Philippines off the San Bernardino Strait. Though Reno nearly capsized, the ships’ companies of Zuni and Reno combined efforts and the tug succeeded in towing the cruiser 1,500 miles back to Ulithi, a Pacific atoll that during the war became the world’s largest naval base.

Zuni moved back out to sea in February 1945, arriving off Iwo Jima three days after the initial assault. For 31 days, she performed yeoman service for warships in the area. Zuni pulled a transport off a sand bar and provided partial power to LST-944, which had lost an engine, as the tank landing ship made a run for the beach. The use of a tug to help power an LST onto the beach was a Navy first in amphibious landings.

Zuni’s work in the shallows was dangerous, even as she assisted landing craft and laid submerged fuel pipes. While attempting to get LST-727 under way March 23, 1945, Zuni was stranded on Iwo Jima’s Yellow Beach when a broken towline fouled her anchor and propeller. After losing two crewmen, suffering a broken keel and holes in her hull, she was pulled off the beach and eventually towed to Pearl Harbor in late May for repairs. During her three months there, World War II ended.

In 1946, the Zuni was transferred to the US Coast Guard for service as a cutter. Following the USCG custom of naming cutters in her class of ship after Native American tribes, the ex-tug was renamed USCGC Tamaroa (WAT-166), after the Tamaroa tribe of the Illiniwek people. The bulk of her USCG career was spent on patrol, working in drug interdiction and fisheries protection.

As Tamaroa, she was best known for her search-and-rescue work in late October 1991 during the “No Name Storm of Halloween” – today better known as “the Perfect Storm,” in the wake of Sebastian Junger’s book and later movie of the same title. Fighting heavy seas of historic proportions, the Coast Guard cutter dubbed “The Tammy” searched for the lost fishing vessel Andrea Gail off the New
England coast to no avail. She also rescued four of five New York Air National Guard crewmen from the 106th Air Rescue Group when their helicopter ran out of fuel. That rescue earned the Tamaroa and her crew the Coast Guard Unit Commendation and the prestigious Coast Guard Foundation Award.

According to USCG history, the Tamaroa’s work included other high profile rescue and assistance incidents:

- On June 20, 1956, a Venezuelan Airlines Super Constellation aircraft crashed and sank 32 miles off Asbury Park, N.J., with the loss of 74 lives. Tamaroa arrived on scene and assisted in retrieving bodies and debris from the Atlantic Ocean.
- On July 26, 1956, Tamaroa arrived onsite after Italian liner Andrea Doria collided with the Stockholm and sank off Nantucket Island, Mass. Tamaroa rendezvoused with the USCGC Owasco and both cutters then escorted the damaged Stockholm safely to New York Harbor.
- Also in 1991, Tamaroa rescued three people from the sailboat Satori 75 miles off Nantucket amid 40-foot seas and in 80-knot winds.

After Tamaroa was decommissioned by the Coast Guard Feb. 1, 1994, she was donated to the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum in New York City. A former crewman saw her tied up next to the carrier Intrepid and began a campaign to restore her. He and others interested in her fate formed the Zuni Maritime Foundation, a non-profit organization in Richmond, Va. The foundation planned to preserve Zuni/Tamaroa in an operational condition and use her as a working museum to educate the public.

Restoration work on the vessel was underway from 2009-2011 in Virginia, but Tamaroa suffered engine room flooding during a storm. Due to lack of funding to dry dock her and a home port/permanent mooring facility, plans for Zuni/Tamaroa changed course toward preparation for eventual sinking by Coleen Marine as an artificial reef. Meanwhile, property the Zuni Maritime Foundation had acquired to outfit the ship was removed and transferred to other museum ships.

After Zuni/Tamaroa was environmentally prepared for reefing, and with watertight integrity of her hull maintained for transit, she left Norfolk, Va. under tow en route to the Del-Jersey-Land artificial reef site jointly managed by Delaware and New Jersey, and her final resting place.

-30-