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Grounded cruise ship afloat again; underwater obstruction cleared

By STEVE STONE, The Virginian-Pilot

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The Spirit of Nantucket sits in the Intracoastal Waterway after being run aground Thursday morning. HYUNSOO LEO KIM | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

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VIRGINIA BEACH

The Spirit of Nantucket is in a Norfolk shipyard for repairs, and the obstacle it may have hit has been lifted from the Intracoastal Waterway.

A crane placed the debris – apparently a discarded bulkhead – onto a barge about 9:30 p.m., clearing the way for an inspection of the channel.

If no more obstructions are found overnight, the busy maritime corridor could be back in full operation this morning.

It took a lot of work to clear the debris that the ship may have hit on Thursday, cutting a foot-long gash in its hull.

The Coast Guard said the 207-foot cruise ship, deliberately run aground to keep it from sinking, was re-floated just before 8 a.m. Saturday.

Pushed by a tug, it was escorted by the Coast Guard and a Virginia Beach police boat to Colonna's Shipyard in Norfolk for repairs, said Petty Officer Chris Evanson, a Coast Guard spokesman.

After the accident, the Army Corps of Engineers – which maintains the 1,090-mile waterway from Norfolk to Miami – located a large piece of debris in the area, about 4 miles north of the Pungo Ferry Bridge.

Steve Baum of the Corps said a team from Crofton Industries of Portsmouth went to work before noon Saturday to remove it.

Divers secured it in slings and, at about 3:30 p.m., a crane tried to lift it onto a barge. But “the sling broke, and it fell back to the

bottom," Baum said.

Divers attached additional slings, and by 9 p.m., it was dangling above the water.

They initially had trouble positioning it on the barge "because it's so huge," Baum said. But after repositioning the barge, the crane lowered it safely onto the deck. It will now be taken out of the area for disposal.

With the debris removed, a Corps survey team that had stood by at the scene all day began a check of the area using sonar to make certain there is no remaining hazard.

If none is found, Coast Guard restrictions can be lifted. Those rules have prevented any commercial craft and recreational vessels with a draft of more than 6 feet from traversing the area.

The object had reduced the draft – the clearance for a vessel – to 7½ feet. The allowed minimum is 12 feet.

"It appears to be a bulkhead" and almost certainly fell from a barge, Baum said. "We're talking some trash that came from somewhere else, because there's no bulkheads in that whole area."

And he is certain that it fell there recently, probably in the last few days.

It's so large, Baum said, another boat would have struck it if not the Nantucket.

The Nantucket was carrying 66 passengers and crew on what was to have been a 10-day trip from Alexandria to Charleston, S.C.

No one was hurt, and all the passengers have been taken on their trip by bus or been given a partial refund by the cruise ship operator, Seattle-based Cruise West.

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Whale-size hunk of debris is a big mystery on a barge

By STEVE STONE, The Virginian-Pilot

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VIRGINIA BEACH

The Intracoastal Waterway is clear today and officials have begun an inquiry they hope will explain how a huge piece of debris ended up in the channel.

The first question: Just what the heck is the massive, whale-shaped bundle of wood pulled from the waterway?

It is suspected of damaging the cruise ship Spirit of Nantucket on Thursday, forcing its captain to ground the vessel to prevent it from sinking.

"I've never seen anything like it, and I've seen everything there is to see on the waterfront," said Bob Crofton, president of the company that raised it. "I think it was built by aliens."

While it is likely of more Earthly origin, it is a perplexing sight - huge and likely quite old.

It measures 40 feet in length and is 7 to 8 feet tall, and is about 13 feet wide. Crofton estimates it weighs 30 to 40 tons.

It appears to be fashioned mostly of solid timber and has the remnants of metal plates and spikes in it.

Worms have left artistic channels on its surfaces, and other marine life appears to have made it a home.

Boaters stared as they sailed past the hunk resting on a barge at Crofton's Portsmouth facility near the Midtown Tunnel along Scott's Creek.

Crew from the Nantucket also came by to see it.

"It looks like a section of an old, very old, blockade chain that was used to prevent entry of vessels into rivers or bays," said Tom Ruzala, director of nautical operations for Cruise West, the company that operates the Nantucket.



The mass is 40 feet long, 7 to 8 feet tall, and about 13 feet wide.

It has several wooden posts sticking out of what used to be its top. They look as if they might once have been bollards used as mooring lines for ships.

The mass curves to a point, or bow, at one end to further enhance the nautical mystery.

Attesting to its age, the 7-foot spikes driven through its width - once presumably flush with the wooden surface - now protrude several inches from the rotted mass.

Crofton shook his head. He has no idea what he is going to do to dispose of it.

"You can't sink it, it will just float back up. And you can't cut it with chain saws," he said.

Whatever it is, now that it is out of the water, the Coast Guard has lifted restrictions on vessels in the area where it was found, a few miles north of the Pungo Ferry Bridge.

A survey team from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which maintains the waterway, used sonar to locate the debris Thursday. The corps then hired Crofton Industries to remove it.

Divers and workers spent much of Saturday trying to lift it, and just after 9:30 p.m., a crane was able to load it aboard the barge.

Within minutes of moving it out of the area, corps personnel surveyed the waterway and confirmed that the draft, which had been reduced to 7-1/2 feet, was back to the minimum of 12 feet in the area.

Col. Dan Anninos, the corps' Norfolk District commander, praised Crofton's fast work clearing the busy channel that is especially popular with recreational boaters. It runs for 1,090 miles from Norfolk to Miami.

Finding the source of the debris may prove "tough," said Terry A. McCann, a corps spokesman.

He said investigators will examine it for evidence of where it came from, but that may be lacking.

"We'll see what the object tells us," he said.

The corps also will question people who work daily along the waterway.

For instance, "we are checking with the operators at the Great Bridge Locks to see if they will recognize the object as something that came through there," McCann said. "It may have been on a barge."

He said anyone with information about the object can call the corps.

McCann said the incident underscores the importance of mariners alerting authorities about obstacles so they can be marked and removed.

"It's the responsibility of mariners, whether they see something, hit something or if they have lost something in the water that may be an obstruction, to notify authorities," McCann said.

The corps estimates that locating and removing the debris will cost about \$50,000 - an expense that could fall to whoever is responsible for dropping it in the channel, if that's how it got there.

As for the Nantucket, it has been moved to Colonna's Shipyard in Norfolk for repairs.

There has been no estimate from the vessel's owners, Seattle-based Cruise West, on the cost to fix the damage - a foot long, 2-inch-wide gash in its hull and rudder damage.

None of the 66 passengers or crew aboard was hurt in the incident, which occurred as the vessel was on a 10-day cruise from Alexandria to Charleston, S.C.

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TO HELP

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers asks that anyone with information about the object pulled from the Intracoastal Waterway to call them at (757) 201-7606.

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