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Tied to a dock in Lázaro Cárdenas by fraying ropes, the U.S. Navy destroyer John Rodgers.

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# One More Battle for a Vintage Warship

By **MARC LACEY**  
and **WALTER R. BARANGER**

LÁZARO CÁRDENAS, Mexico — In its glory days, the United States Navy destroyer John Rodgers was among the most decorated warships of World War II. Now, hull rusting and big guns whitened by bird droppings, the abandoned destroyer finds itself in what could be its final battle, one that could turn the historic ship into a museum or, alternatively, a heap of scrap.

The John Rodgers was one of the 175 Fletcher-class destroyers, which shepherded aircraft carriers and provided withering cover fire during amphibious landings. During two and a half years in the Pacific, it fought in the Philippines and at Kwajalein Atoll, Guam, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. It steamed into Tokyo Bay in September 1945, having earned 12 battle stars without, remarkably, losing a single sailor.

The Fletcher destroyers were a swift breed that each carried nearly 300 sailors into war. While many of the ships suffered heavy losses from kamikaze attacks late in the war, most ended up in scrap yards in the decades after peace was achieved.

Only five survive today — four as museums (in Buffalo; Baton Rouge, La.; Boston; and Greece) and the John Rodgers, which is tethered to a dock in this city, about 150 miles up the coast from Acapulco. Mexican officials want it removed forthwith.

After the John Rodgers was retired in 1946, the Navy lent it to Mexico, which rechristened it the Cuítláhuac. Mexico eventually bought it outright and deployed it on patrols, including hunts for narcotics traffickers. That ended in July 2001.

Then along came Ward Brewer II, 45, an American entrepreneur who drafted a plan after 9/11 to recycle World War II-era ships as floating command posts during disasters in the United States. Mr. Brewer's disaster plan never won the backing of the United States government, but he persuaded the Mexicans to issue a presidential decree in 2006 turning over the John Rodgers to his nonprofit company, the Beauchamp Tower Corporation.

He proposed that the John Rodgers be based in Mobile Bay, in Alabama, as a floating museum, but be available as a communications and logistics center should disaster strike.

First, though, the ship would have to voyage home, which has proved a tricky task.

"We ran into a number of issues," Mr. Brewer said in a telephone interview last week.

He managed in August 2006 to persuade a Texas towing company to haul the John Rodgers through the Panama Canal to Mobile.

Veterans of the John Rodgers,

Marc Lacey reported from Lázaro Cárdenas, and Walter R. Baranger from New York.

dwindling in numbers as years pass, planned to have a reunion in October 2006 to coincide with its arrival at Mobile Bay. The ship proved a no-show. And the venerable destroyer, unscathed in war, found itself in an international legal battle.

John Bergene, who owns the towing company E. J. Ventures, said that on Labor Day weekend in 2006, he hired a crew of five, bought fuel and dispatched a tow ship to Mexico. At the last moment, he said, Mr. Brewer called to say a down payment on towing fees would be delayed until after the holiday.

The money never arrived, but Mr. Brewer provided bank references sufficient for Mr. Bergene to proceed — "against my better judgment," he said in a telephone interview from the Netherlands.

Then he went to Mexico, only to find that Mr. Brewer was stalling, Mr. Bergene said.

"He said Wednesday you'll get your money, and then Thursday and then Friday," Mr. Bergene recounted. "Finally I said we're



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No one seems to want the ship to stay in Lázaro Cárdenas.

not going anywhere until I get my money."

After a month and a half, Mr. Brewer said, he found another towing job and sailed away.

Mr. Brewer contends that the towing fiasco resulted from a series of misunderstandings with Mr. Bergene and the Mexican government. Still, Mr. Bergene won a federal court judgment of nearly \$800,000 against Mr. Brewer and Beauchamp Tower. Unable to collect, he has a lien on the John Rodgers.

"It's hurt me badly, and it's hurt a lot of people badly, and it's made the Mexican government look like fools," Mr. Bergene said. "The Mexican government needs to go after Ward."

The Mexican authorities may do just that.

They say they have been infinitely patient. They say Mr. Brewer initially told them that after having the John Rodgers removed from a Mexican naval base, he would store the 376-foot vessel at a nearby granary pier for a week or so. It has been there more than 18 months. Port officials said they were consulting lawyers and making plans to seize the ship and sell it for scrap.

"The hurricane season is coming and it's a danger for all of us,"

said Samuel Fonseca, head of the grain port here. "If they can't move it from this port, we have to see what we can do."

Even if the ship is scrapped, the fate most of the Fletcher destroyers have met, it probably will not yield enough to cover all the debt associated with it, Mexican officials say.

Besides the \$800,000 court judgment, Mexican officials say Mr. Brewer owes as much as \$1 million in fines and other fees from the ship's long stay in Mexico. Beauchamp Tower's tax return put its gross income last year at less than \$25,000.

Transforming old warships into museums typically costs more, sometimes millions of dollars more, than many veterans groups imagine. The obsolete vessels are floating asbestos mines, full of assorted solvents, fuels and other toxins as well. And their guns, though long silent, worry the United States government, which seeks assurances that they are licensed or disabled.

The challenges do not stop there. Spare parts are a problem. Crew members who know the vessels are dying off. Then there is insurance, constant painting, naval architect's fees and assorted permits. On top of all that, the cost of towing the John Rodgers home has ballooned with soaring fuel prices. What was originally a \$350,000 job, Mr. Bergene said, would cost about \$500,000.

Then there is the condition of the John Rodgers itself. Long neglected, it is showing wear. Rust is building up, and wind is tearing away at the deck where American sailors helped wage some of the Pacific war's greatest battles.

"I used to go on deck and watch everything going on," said Gerry Fried, 91, a former Navy radio operator now living in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Recalling the fighting on the Japanese coast, he added, "It was very exciting when the ship pulled into Suruga Wan and shelled the shore."

Some who served on the ship are resigned to never seeing the John Rodgers again.

"I'd like to see it brought back to the States, of course, but it seems to be headed to scrapyards," said David Carnell, 87, of Wilmington, N.C., who was a young officer aboard the John Rodgers in 1945.

Mr. Brewer, though, remains ever the optimist. The other day, he said in a telephone interview from Florida that deals were in the works, plans being made, delicate discussions taking place.

The destroyer would be on its way to the United States by month's end, he said. Later, he said that could slip to August, at the latest.

"We're planning to move it out of there," Mr. Brewer said, urging that no article on the John Rodgers be published until his deal was done. "I can't go into any details."



A fisherman, Pedro Losano, at the Pacific port, with the John Rodgers in the background.