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WRECK IN THE MAKING: FLYING CLOUD

by Owen Waters

The British Virgin Islands Scuba organization and the BVI Tourist Board recently announced they are in the process of bringing this 208-foot barquentine home to the waters that she once chartered through gracefully as a square rigged boat, following news that the Premier had granted his permission.

Built for the French Navy in 1935, Oiseau des Isles (Bird of the Islands) served as a cadet training ship. She is 208 feet long, 32 feet wide and her draft boasts 16 feet. She weighed in at 400 tons (before charter guests and rum!).

During World War II, she was based in Tahiti and posed as a decoy, spying for the Allied Forces. After the war, she was used to transport cargo along the Baja coast. In 1968, she joined the Windjammer fleet.

Flying Cloud sailed the waters of the Sir Francis Drake Channel with many thousands of loyal guests who came back year after year. She was retired from active service in 2002. The money it cost to

keep her in the fleet for paying guests was deemed prohibitive. The Windjammer Fleet and Captain Mike Burke have always thought that she should be in the BVI waters for her retirement, and before they ceased operations this past fall, gave permission for the BVI Scuba organization to secure the wreck.

The ship had previously been donated to the Trinidad Museum, but that institution chose not to accept her into its collection. Now Kevin Rowlette of Husky Towing is in discussions to tow her from her current resting place at the dock in Port of Spain, Trinidad to the BVI. When she arrives here, she will rest on *Flying Cloud's* old hurricane mooring in Great Harbour on Peter Island while the BVI Scuba organization prepares her for sinking. The VI Shipping Registry, along with the BVI Ports Authority, Conservation and Fisheries, with input from the BVI Scuba organization, will decide on her final resting place in the territory.

Watching over this process closely will be Jim and Paula Nelson of SV Milliways at Nanny Cay. Jim and Paula were married on *Flying Cloud* in April

1990. Eloping, the only people privy to their special day were Captain Adrian, who arranged everything including the wedding cake, and his partner, a former Miss Universe contender who did Paula's makeup on the day.

As their annual getaway when the *Cloud* retired, Jim and Paula set up their new life in the BVI on their Benetau 48 in 2006. Sixty-four guests and 20 crew bore witness and Paula went through the hull of the deck to meet her husband who waited patiently by the bar, drinks being served by Randy of Mulligan's Bar at Nanny Cay.

Jim recalls the coffee that would kick-start the day accompanied by a Bloody Mary and how the Captain would pinpoint their daily destinations on a map placemat of the BVI. With a swagger and an old charm the *Cloud*, crew and guests went about their passage with the lifeboats taking them to favoured beaches for lunches. Steering away from any bad omens, the Nelsons hope to proudly toast the old girl from their own boat as she lays home to rest in the BVI, close by. 