

DRUG BOAT WILL SERVE LIFE TERM

Reef Association Sinks Panamanian Ship Off Lockwood Folly

BY DOUG RUTTER

A Panamanian ship seized about 10 years ago in a drug raid off the Brunswick County coast started a life term of community service last week.

The *Jell II*, a 170-foot, steel-hulled ship, was sunk at an artificial reef site 10 miles off Lockwood Folly Inlet last Wednesday.

Federal officials confiscated the boat in the early 1980s after stopping it about 100 miles offshore and seizing several tons of marijuana on board, according to Charlie Perry of American Fish Company in Southport.

The boat had been moored in Wilmington since then, but now promises to attract fish such as the prized king mackerel to the waters off Lockwood Folly Inlet.

Dale McDowell, president of the Long Bay Artificial Reef Association, said the boat was dropped on a reef that was formed in 1987 with a set of old boxcars and later expanded with fiberglass boat molds.

The *Jell II* sinking was the first sinking of a large boat arranged by the seven-year-old reef association, which draws its members from the Brunswick County and Oak Island fishing clubs.

"We sink 'em. You fish 'em" is the motto of the group, which works with and receives financial help from the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries and Brunswick County Commissioners.

The Atlantic Ocean floor along much of the North Carolina coast is flat, not well suited to most recre-



MARINE FISHERIES OFFICIALS watch from their boat as the 170-foot *Jell II* is positioned over an artificial reef 10 miles off Lockwood Folly Inlet. LORAN coordinates are 45352.0, 59289.0.

ational and commercial fishing.

McDowell said artificial reefs provide a special habitat that attracts small bait fish. That, in turn, draws larger fish such as amberjack, cobia, barracuda and kings.

"They'll be catching fish on it before the summer's over," said McDowell, an avid fisherman from

Sunset Harbor. The reef site, No. 445, is located about 9.3 miles out.

Fishermen have already seen benefits from the reef association's last project. A barge was sunk off Shallotte Inlet in December 1989, and anglers were catching fish there the next spring.

But fishermen aren't the only

ones expected to benefit from the addition of the *Jell II* to the Lockwood Folly reef.

"That's going to be good for divers too because it's going to be open where they can go all the way into the bottom," McDowell said.

Three tug boats pushed and pulled the *Jell II* from its resting place in Wilmington to the reef site last Wednesday.

The caravan started down the Cape Fear River on a falling tide around 6:30 a.m. and reached the site about six hours later.

With fishermen watching from three private boats, tug crews positioned the boat just a few feet west of a large yellow buoy marking the

reef and opened valves and hatches on the bottom and sides of the ship.

Water entered the ship's hull for nearly an hour without any visible signs that the vessel would soon sink about 50 feet to the ocean floor.

"I think the *Titanic* sank faster than this," said Ruby McDowell, watching patiently from the sun-drenched deck of her husband's boat, Dalec.

Once the boat started sinking, however, it was only a matter of minutes before it disappeared below the ocean surface. The *Jell II* first tilted on its starboard side before



THE PANAMANIAN SHIP tilts on its starboard side as it starts to sink. Once used to transport illegal drugs, the vessel is now expected to draw fish such as barracuda and king mackerel to the Brunswick County coast.

STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG RUTTER

righting itself and dropping straight to the bottom.

The ship went down shortly after 2 p.m., ending 18 months of wading through red tape and waiting for permits and proper weather conditions.


For acquiring the ship and coordinating the actual sinking, McDowell said the reef association paid \$45,000 to Bordeaux Salvage and Construction Company of Wilmington.

Work on the reef project started in February 1990, when the owner of the salvage company, the Marine Fisheries reef coordinator and two reef association officers met in Wilmington.

Several hundred tons of concrete culvert pipe ranging in size from 15 to 60 inches in diameter had been placed in the hull of the ship to serve as a habitat for fish.

A manufacturer in Wilson donated the concrete pipe. Trucking companies in Leland and Wilmington contributed use of a tractor and trailer to haul the pipe, said Harold Earnhardt, treasurer for the association.

McDowell said the reef association is already planning its next project. A barge will be sunk somewhere off the Brunswick County coast, but a location has not been determined.



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June Was Warm And Dry

The month of June was warmer and much drier than normal in southeastern North Carolina, according to the National Weather Service in Wilmington.

Average temperature for the month was 77.8 degrees, or 1.2 degrees above normal. The region received only 2.57 inches of rain in June, which was 3.08 inches below normal.

The average high temperature in June was 87.7 degrees while the average low was 67.9 degrees, according to the weather service's monthly report.

The highest daily temperature was 96 degrees June 1. The mercury climbed above 90 degrees on 14 days in June.

The coolest reading of the month was 57 degrees, which occurred every day June 6 through June 10.

Cooling degree day units in June totaled 392. That was 44 units above normal and brought the seasonal total to 864, which is 269 above average.

The weather service recorded measurable rainfall nine days during the month and thunderstorms

seven days. The greatest amount of rainfall in a 24-hour period was 1.06 inches on June 19 and 20.

Despite the lack of rain, there were only seven clear days during the month. The weather service reported there were 12 cloudy days and 11 partly cloudy days. This produced 66 percent of the possible sunshine for the month.

Average wind speed for the month of June was 7.8 mph. The weather service recorded a peak gust of 44 mph during a thunderstorm June 1.

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