

* Boat —

Embattled Scientology boat moved to marina

By ANNETTE DROLET
Sun staff writer

CLEARWATER — Part of its cabin had to be removed to make the journey manageable. But the Diana was on the move again Friday, this time bound for a Tarpon Springs marina.

The Church of Scientology relocated its yacht dubbed Diana after obtaining a civil court order to take possession of the 53-foot ketch, valued at \$40,000.

The Scientologists contend in a lawsuit that a Clearwater boat repair-restoration shop kept the vessel "without reason" and planned to destroy, conceal or take Diana out of state.

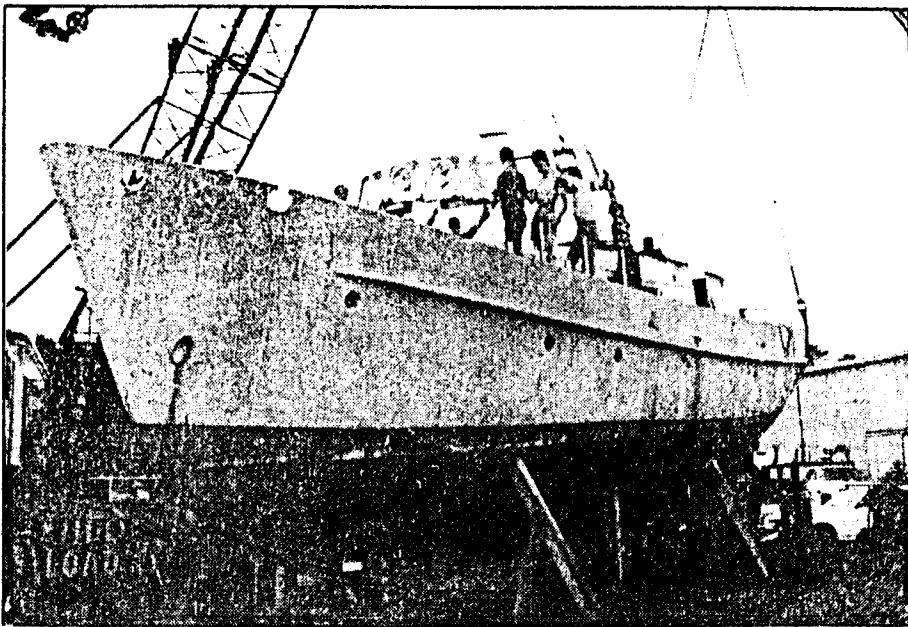
But Michael Cummings — operator of The Wooden Boat Shop at 1140 Eldridge St. — denied those allegations Friday.

"There was no intention of trying to hold their boat hostage or steal their boat or anything else," he said. "I wouldn't even want the vessel."

The latest controversy over the Diana comes four months after city zoning officials derailed the Scientologists' plans to store or display the yacht at the Sandcastle Motel, a sect retreat in downtown Clearwater.

The Diana — once owned by Sci-

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Cranes prepare to haul Diana away.

Sun staff photo by HOWARD HALM

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entology founder L. Ron Hubbard — subsequently was moved to The Wooden Boat Shop. Cummings contended the Scientologists hired his outfit to perform "a large percentage" of restoration work on the vessel.

But after the sect switched project managers, the Scientologists refused to allow Cummings' crew to touch the yacht, he said. Sect members also "slipped in" to work on the Diana, Cummings contended, after he locked the gate because Scientologists were behind on their \$200-per-month rent.

Scientologists, however, claim their contract with Cummings granted them access to the vessel 24 hours a day or as needed. When Cummings refused to allow Scientologists to work on or move the boat, sect lawyer Paul B. Johnson said he had "no alternative" but to seek legal relief.

In their lawsuit against Cummings and his brother, Steven, Scientologists contend the defendants "are engaging in, or are about to engage in, conduct that may place the claimed property in danger of destruction, concealment, waste, removal from the state or removal from the jurisdiction of the court."

Scientologists cited criminal court records indicating Steven Cummings was convicted and placed on probation two years ago in connection with an alleged insurance scam involving another vessel, the 40-ton Tonga.

Cummings, the former captain, claimed the luxurious sailboat sank after being struck by lightning while rounding the Florida Keys in 1981. But a year later, police found the sailboat — renamed the Black Thunder — in Haiti.

Those incidents have nothing to do with the Diana controversy, Michael Cummings said Friday, because his brother is not a partner in The Wooden Boat Shop.

"I think that's pretty low, bringing up someone's past history when someone's not really involved," Michael Cummings added.

Still, Circuit Civil Court Judge Philip Federico issued an order earlier this month allowing Scientologists to regain possession of the Diana until the lawsuit is resolved.

Friday — after a sheriff's official enforced the judge's order — the embattled boat was transported via tractor-trailer to an undisclosed Tarpon Springs marina.

There, it will be refurbished for service as a training vessel for the sect's Sea Org, according to spokesman Ludwig Alpers.