

DISCOVERY

PLACES TO GO, PEOPLE TO SEE, THINGS TO DO

Veteran's House Open To Submarine Buffs

By OWEN McNALLY
Courant Staff Writer

When you step into the Submarine Museum and Library in Middletown, you're boarding an 85-year-old duplex packed from stem to stern with submarine memorabilia and undersea lore.

Several small rooms in the two-story museum are packed with colorful plaques, patches and pennants, oil paintings, charts and maps.

Upstairs, there's a handsome display of wooden, handcarved model submarines that represent each class of sub built from 1900 to the present.

One of the first displays you see when you walk into this homemade museum are war flags that flew on conning towers. The flags are marked with blood red circles that represent a sub's number, of "kills" of Japanese ships and boats.

"These kills could be for anything from a Japanese destroyer to a sampan," says Bernie Bastura, curator and self-taught submarine savant and inexhaustible fount of facts and statistics.

"People always ask me why our subs would sink a harmless sampan."

"Well, it's because the Japanese often armed them to the teeth, turning them into men of war disguised as innocent fishing boats," he says.

Besides stepping into a mini-warehouse of submarine nostalgia, you've also stepped into Bastura's life's dream.

The museum is a non-profit hobby he sustains with his full-time job as a spray painter in a nearby factory across the Connecticut River in Portland. He doesn't charge admission, but doesn't discourage patrons from tossing an offering into a donation box.

Since 1954, when he was first bitten with the passion to create a submarine museum, Bastura has labored through often stormy waters to keep his precious hobby afloat.

An Army World War II veteran who fought against the Nazis in the Battle of the Bulge, Bastura's romance with submarines began in 1954 when he got out of the service.

Bastura — who didn't set foot on a real sub until 1964 — began clipping newspaper articles, buying books on subs, studying works in libraries and checking out museums to see how they operated.

"Running this place has been my life even though I never made a nickel out of it. This is a strictly downhome venture — what I call a rustic-type museum."

"Initially, I sent out thousands of letters all over the country trying to get it started. For years it was like trying to get blood out of a stone," he says.

Still run on a shoestring, the museum is dedicated to veterans of the submarine service.

Bastura has willed his entire collection to the U.S. Submarine Veterans, World War II, a national group that became associated with the museum in 1968. He's an honorary member of the veterans' group.

"Those guys are like family to me," he says fervently.

Most of the exhibits in the museum have been donated by veterans, submarine crews,

shipyards and the U.S. Navy Department. Some are "found" items, such as a tall propeller Bastura rescued from a junkyard in Newport, R.I.

Many displays are steeped in "the silent service's" celebrated heroism that played a key role in defeating fascist Germany and Japan in World War II.

So, not surprisingly, the mini-museum unashamedly exudes a king-size amount of old-fashioned, red-white-and-blue patriotism.

"Loyalty and patriotism to the United States Government," as a free pamphlet declares, is part of the museum's creed. Last year the museum spread this word to its more than 4,000 visitors — a total that included Navy personnel, veterans, scout groups and senior citizens organizations.

Visitors come from throughout the United States, Bastura says. His guest book has been signed by submarine buffs from England, France, Ireland and even Saudi Arabia, he says.

Bastura and his brother Frank have been living in their duplex for 46 years, since they were kids. So it's also not surprising that the museum has a homey atmosphere.

"People come in here and relax and feel at home. Some spend a half a day just browsing."

"Veterans will spend a whole day in that library," he says as he points to the reading room. "The library is my pride and joy, my baby."

Jammed with metal files and bookcases, the library is located in what was a kitchen before the museum opened on Labor Day 1966. Now the former kitchen provides food for thought for old salts and sea scholars.

"The library is the most complete of its kind. We've got files and photos and you name it here on every submarine in service since the inventor John B. Holland's first submarine was accepted by the Navy in 1900."

"We've got it up to date right up to today's Trident subs," he says.

A key element in the files, which are packed with enough statistics to send a trivia sub buff mad, are war patrol reports. These detailed logs provide a chronicle of the daily life aboard America's submarine fleet in combat during World War II.

"These war patrols will tell you practically every detail about what life was really like on subs — not like that unrealistic garbage you see in movies on TV, which pretend to depict life on subs."

"If somebody sneezed or went to the toilet, you can read about it here," he says.

Veterans head for this file and pore over it by the hour, re-experiencing their days as young submariners, Bastura says.

"I've seen vets shed tears as they go through these chronicles," he says.

Bastura and his brother, who's retired, live in on the other side of the duplex. One or the other will respond to a visitor's knock and give a guided tour from top to bottom during scheduled museum hours.

Practically each item in the museum has a special story all its own.

Among these is a weathered life ring that saved the life of a Niantic sailor whose submarine sank after striking a Japanese mine during the Pacific Theater.

"But for that life ring, he would have been



Richard Mei / The Hartford Courant

Bernie Bastura, above, has an impressive collection of hand-drawn and hand-painted World War II submarine patches in his Submarine Museum and Library in Middletown. Below, a painting of a sub hangs among wall plaques in the cozy museum.



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gone," Bastura says. Before you go, Bastura invites you into the library to hear a tape recorded version of the museum's "official song."

Set to the tune of "The Wash Cannonball" it's an old submariner's nostalgic celebration of youthful glories and the passing of the

traditions to the new generation. Bastura wipes away a tear as he listens.

The Submarine Library and Museum, 440 Washington St., Middletown, is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Phone: 346-8388.