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A Treasure Chest of Submarine Lore

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MIDDLETOWN — Like a lock of hair from a long-dead friend, the white life ring of the USS Albacore SS-218 is a reminder of the submarine lost at sea in World War II.

Bernard A. Bastura, owner of the life ring he treasures, as well as thousands of other pieces of submarine memorabilia, speaks of the ship in almost human terms.

"Let's see what we can dig up on the poor, old Albacore," Bastura says, digging into the voluminous files at the Submarine Library and Museum in his Middletown home.

He finds a piece of paper that tells the sad tale of the Albacore's demise.

"She was lost by hitting a mine," says Bastura. "She hit a mine and blew up, 7 November 1944."

"Up to the time of sinking, she sank 13 enemy vessels, totaling 74,838 tons, before she was lost herself," he said.

The Albacore was one of 52 U.S. Navy submarines lost during the second world war. The museum, located in a simple, 70-year-old, brown-shingled house that has a 13½-foot long wood model of the submarine Robert E. Lee sitting on the porch, is dedicated to the 3,655 men "still on patrol" — men who lost their lives aboard the 52 ill-fated subs.

The museum was started in 1954 when Bastura, then 21, visited a submarine museum at the Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, known as the submarine capital of the world.

It was love at first sight.

From there, he began to save every article dealing with submarines, rescue ships, shipyards, sub bases and oceanography. He started a library, took photographs of the vessels, wrote to crew members on every U.S. Navy submarine in commission asking for ship mementos and built plastic models of the sleek underwater vessels.

The rest is history. Bastura's collection now fills one side of a two-family house. He and his brother, Frank Bastura, both bachelors, are separated from the museum only by a wall.

Bastura says the privately owned museum is the largest collection on the East Coast — and perhaps in the nation — devoted solely to submarine lore.

Bastura doesn't charge admission, but has a donation box. He averages about 2,000 visitors a year. People hear of the museum largely by word-of-mouth, but it also is included in state listings of tourist attractions.

Most of the visitors are crew members, submarine veterans or people interested in the torpedo-carrying vessels. Bastura says he gets very few visitors who are simply curious about a subject they know nothing about.

When asked why the warships fascinate him so, Bastura, a spray painter at Standard-Knapp Inc. in Portland, says, "I just like them. After all these years, the curiosity is still there."

He continues, "I'm drawn to them like a moth to a candle. There's something about them, the more I read, the more I want to read. Plus, the people I meet here — the vets — when they start telling me about their times on the boats in World War II, it adds a little more fuel to the fire."

The only time Bastura has been on a sub was in 1964, when a friend who worked as a cook on the USS Cavalla SS-244 was able to get him out in Long Island Sound for a one-day cruise. He lives through the tales of others and wishes he had served in the Navy.

Twenty-eight years after he began his collection, Bastura boasts that he is only 35 photographs short of having a complete set — from the first sub built, the USS Holland SS-1 in 1900, to the Michigan number 730, the last nuclear Trident submarine under commission.

To learn about the history of submarines, you can stroll through the six rooms filled with objects such as plaques and patches of ships' emblems, paintings, models, mugs and even an admiral's uniform. Or you can sit down and talk to Bastura.


He knows that 164 subs are now in commission. The others, he explains, were lost at sea, transferred to foreign governments, turned into tourist attractions, towed out to sea and sunk or sold for scrap.

In what was once the kitchen of the house, lost years ago during its transformation into a library, there hangs a ladder, specifically from the lower section of the forward torpedo room of the USS Cavalla. It was donated by the Texas chapter of the U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II.

Bastura has willed the museum's contents to the national veterans' organization, but doesn't know what the group will do with it on his death.

He also has shipboards, used to identify boat names and numbers; Australian beer labels, such as Swan Lager, collected by crew members on foreign shores; a deck of cards designed for playing under infra-red lights at night and Japanese religious medals taken from a survivor of a 10,000-ton Japanese tanker, the Nippon Maru, that sank in the Sea of Ichohok July 1944.

The beer labels were saved by Ray "Trash Can" Tiraschi, a mate who got his nickname because he saved everything. "They loved that Swan label," Bastura said, speaking of the mates as if they were his sons.



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Bernard Bastura displays one of the prize artifacts of his museum, a life preserver from a sunken World War II submarine.

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Thu, Apr 4, 2019