

Managing the Navy's History Collections

A Surprising Trip through Time Via the Naval History and Heritage Command

THEY ARE PART-DETECTIVE, part-researcher, technology-savvy defenders with a smidgeon of enforcer. They are the curators of the Collections Management Division at the Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC).

The Navy is big on tradition, and that tradition comes with a collection of items that range from a \$4.4 million dollar sterling silver trophy to a simple Thanksgiving menu from a destroyer during World War II.

NHHC is the keeper of 10,864 reels of microfilm and 5.67 terabytes of electronic data, along with 200 million pages documenting history. While the Command has undergone a number of name changes over the years, its mission has not—the acquisition, custody, distribution and exhibit of items of historical or patriotic value to the Navy. NHHC personnel also provide guidance on the preservation and storage of historical material and make those items available to the

the collection to determine the condition of the items and whether they should be retained or donated to another organization.

With almost no staff for many years, it was all collections division personnel could do to keep up with items on loan to a variety of museums and organizations in every state of the union while at the same time storing and cataloging boxes and boxes of items donated from families of former Sailors.

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Some are hand-chosen from decommissioned ships by the curators themselves, others are donated by those who served the Navy, plucked from a moment in time to inspire people decades later. And some are just items found while cleaning out the attic.

“We often joke the last time we were caught up with our extensive inventory was right after the first item was donated to the Navy,” said NHHC's head curator Karen France.

public and provide maintenance when necessary.

The entire collections division is undergoing an artifact baseline reset, which means the staff is going through the collection, item-by-item, to make sure it is correctly cataloged, photographed, inventoried and if necessary, rehoused under the proper conditions, which includes a constant temperature and humidity. It also allows the division to evaluate

It's up to a relatively small staff to keep track of the 595,000 artifacts, of which more than 30,000 are on loan throughout the world. The Underwater Archeology Branch (UAB) catalogs more than 17,000 sunken military ships and aircraft around the world.

From 2003–2009, Frank Thompson, Collection Management Division deputy director, and France were the only two collection managers,



Kate Morrand, one of NHHC's archeological conservators, points out the embossing of a two-mast ship on a leather wallet to German Embassy Naval Attache Capt. Karl Setzer and his aide, Cmdr. Tobias Voss. The wallet was found by a diver near the wreck of a World War II German U-boat and then given to the Navy Criminal Investigative Service.

MC1 Tim Comerford

responsible for a collection of more than 150,000 items.

Real progress has been made in updating the NHHC's inventory as staff go through boxes to see what treasures might be mixed in with the plaques and other private donations. "People would call us about things in their attic and if we wanted only one item, we would end up taking it all," France laughed.

While that "generosity" certainly contributed to the backlog of items to be cataloged, part of the job is also culling out what doesn't belong—items in poor condition and redundant to the collection.

An inspector general report in 2011 determined some artifacts were at risk, items sensitive to temperature and humidity, such as textiles and art, microfilm and photographs.

For More Information

FOR A GREAT example of some of the work overseen by UAB personnel, read our article "Raising the War of 1812: USS Scorpion May Be Part of Bicentennial Celebration" from the winter 2013 issue of *Currents*. To browse the *Currents* archives, visit the Department of the Navy's Energy, Environment and Climate Change web site at <http://greenfleet.dodlive.mil/currents-magazine>.





Kate Morrand uses a borescope to look at the internal workings of the midsection of Howell Torpedo Number 24 at the warehouse at the Washington Navy Yard. UAB personnel discovered deck logs stating that the torpedo was lost by the battleship Iowa (BB 4) during a training operation in December 1899. The torpedo was discovered in March 2014 by U.S. Navy dolphins off the coast of San Diego.

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NHHC's Master Chief Information Systems Technician Jim Leuci explains the different chief uniforms during a Hampton Roads Surface Navy Association luncheon honoring the Year of the Chief.
MC1 Julie R. Matyascik

“The report suggested the department consolidate where they could, cull the collection and inventory it to get it to the right size,” France said.

As they catalogue the items, many are photographed and displayed on NHHC's Flickr site (at www.flickr.com/photos/navalhistory) since most of the artifacts are not stored at the Washington Navy Yard. Case in point—the sterling silver Spokane Naval Trophy given each year to the Pacific-based ship with the best record in battle efficiency. It's currently on display in San Diego. When the trophy was crafted in 1908, it was valued at \$10,000. When appraised 100 years later, its value had skyrocketed to over four million dollars.

Some of the artifacts come from companies not typically associated with the Navy. One of the items taken off a decommissioned submarine was a 1960 Steinway upright piano. Steinway & Sons contacted the command and offered to restore it if they could display it for a while. The restored piano is now in the submarine mess deck display at the Cold War Gallery at the Washington Navy Yard.

“Other businesses with items in the Navy collection that might surprise a few include the jewelry companies of Tiffany and Bailey, Banks & Biddle,” France said.

“The Chelsea Clock Company of Massachusetts has had a long history with the Navy, having supplied thousands of

The Spokane Trophy is awarded to ships that demonstrate overall excellence in surface ship combat system readiness and warfare operations during work-ups and operational missions. The trophy is made of 400 ounces of silver and is valued at over four million dollars.



Karen France examines the World War II battle flag of the destroyer USS Zellars (DD 777) after its recent conservation. The flag, damaged during a 1945 kamikaze attack, was preserved through the efforts of NHHHC, USS Zellars Association, and the Stillwater Textile Conservation Studio. Zellars saw combat service in both World War II and Korea, was attacked by three kamikazes during the Battle of Okinawa and suffered 64 killed when two hit the ship. The conservation of the flag was especially meaningful to the USS Zellars Association's 30 surviving World War II members.

clocks for Navy ships over the years," Thompson said.

When a donated Chelsea clock turned out to be one of the rarer ones due to a low production rate, the company asked if they could restore the clock and then display it to show the company's long and storied history with the Navy. In all of these cases, the companies contacted the Navy offering to restore the pieces made by their own companies.

It's the "loaning" and "borrowing" aspect of the job that can often be the most challenging. "We have more than 15,000 objects in the loan program, and there's something in every state," Thompson said.

Complicating that task is the fact that in the past, loans were sometimes not as controlled as they are today.

Loan agreements can sometimes include language that unintentionally complicates matters, mistakenly using the word "gift" instead of "loan," for example. Then, when the agreement is revisited years later, it's difficult to determine ownership of the artifact. That's when curators turn into sleuths.

They don't always win their battles. Most of the time, just a bit of bluffing will work. But with no real enforcement, the staff can only ask for people to do the right thing and return the artifacts.

"We are upgrading our records to properly distinguish a gift from a loan," Thompson said. "We've also tightened up our policies so there are no more open-ended loans. If the custodians show they have been good

stewards of the artifact, they can continue to hold on to it."

For now, the work of the artifact baseline reset continues while the collections division is consolidating a large portion of its artifact collection from three different locations to a single warehouse in Richmond, Virginia.

"We have literally tons of material, some of which is priceless, and nearly all of it irreplaceable," said France. "But the work is well worth it if it means Sailors and citizens can better appreciate what the Navy has meant to our country since its inception." 

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