

Deckhands Needed for U.S.S. Batfish

By Shelly Robinson

Oklahoma is a unique state, rich in history and full of interesting sites. One of the most intriguing is a World War II submarine sitting quietly in a grassy park, just off the Muskogee Turnpike. The U.S.S. Batfish (SS310), a Balao-class submarine, was originally commissioned on August 21, 1943.

One of only about 60 military memorials and museums in the United States, the Batfish was a fierce fighter in her prime. While patrol records show a total of 15 ships sunk by the Batfish, the submarine was officially credited with sinking six, including three enemy submarines, damaging three others and rescuing three aviators. The 6th War Patrol of Batfish was given the Presidential Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism in action in the sinking of three enemy submarines



Commissioning Officers of the U.S.S. Batfish, 1943.

between December 1944 and March 1945.

You might wonder how a 311-foot-long submarine arrived here in Green Country, and that is a story in itself. The Submarine Veterans of World War II, with the help of then State Senator James Inhofe, worked three years to bring the submarine to its current location. The Batfish website details the treacherous journey from the Orange Naval Inactive Maintenance Facility in Texas to New Orleans, then upriver to Muskogee, including the sinking of one of the barges helping tow her up the Arkansas River. She has called Muskogee home since July of 1972.

Nearly 40 years later, a new group of volunteers takes care of the aging memorial and museum. Volunteer coordinator Mark Allen says it is a labor of love. "I had visited some other memorials before the Batfish, even though I grew up here. I first visited in 1998, and I was immediately hooked." Mark created the Batfish website, began serving as historian and has kept busy with a number of different restoration tasks since.

Mark and other faithful volunteers have been working on

replacement of the wooden deck of the Batfish for almost two years. "It's a huge project and it's really difficult to make a lot of progress working a few times a month with only a handful of volunteers," says Mark. "It's like the old saying: many hands make the load light. We really need some more hands."

Mark's wife Leilani shares his love of the Batfish and takes care of the museum counter and various other projects that allow the volunteers to work on the deck replacement. They spent so much time together there when they were dating that Mark actually proposed on the Batfish. "It's definitely one of my favorite places," Leilani smiles.

Almost all of the regular volunteers work full-time jobs during the week, so weekends are the only time they are able to devote to the Batfish. Brandt Hopper, an employee of American Airlines, said, "The first President Bush called for Americans to volunteer, and this is my service. I love World War II history and feel it's an honor to help preserve it."

Jack Crocker, a retired engineer, saw a newspaper article about the deck replacement project and decided to volunteer. Jack shared, "It just feels good to help out." New volunteer Jason Denno works in Newton County, Missouri and said he found the Batfish after touring the U.S.S. Alabama and U.S.S. Drum. He said he is drawn to the idea of preserving history for his daughter and generations to come.



Volunteer coordinator Mark Allen (kneeling) is joined by volunteers Jack Crocker, Leilani Allen, Ed Williams, Wesley Green, Brandt Hopper and Jason Denno.

Mark shared that all the long-time volunteers, including Vaughn, Mary Newkirk and Barre McGowan, have shown great dedication, but more help is needed. Besides the decking replacement project, another effort is about to begin. "We are starting the process of cataloging the museum displays, and that will be a major undertaking. We try to fit our volunteers to what they enjoy and are good at. From landscaping, event planning, refurbishing park benches and displays to picking up trash, lawn care and making repairs - there is always something to contribute."

The Batfish will have its annual volunteer workday on Saturday, May 8 from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in preparation for the Batfish Reunion May 11-15. Those interested in volunteering

are encouraged to contact Mark Allen at ussbatfish@yahoo.com or call Park Manager Rick Dennis at (918) 682-6294.

The park is now operating on summer hours and is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. Admission is \$6 for adults and \$3 for children ages 7 to 13, with discounts for groups and members of the military.

For more information, contact

**U.S.S. Batfish
Submarine
War Memorial Park &
Military Museum
(918) 682-6294**

*ussbatfish@yahoo.com
www.ussbatfish.com*

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