



Bill Palmer stands at the doorway to his basement "museum" where he displays artifacts he found while diving on wrecks, many in Long Island Sound and Block Island Sound.

BILL PALMER: DIVING INTO HISTORY

Few divers are as familiar with the netherworld of Long Island Sound as Bill Palmer, a regular speaker at the annual New England Wreck Symposium hosted by the UConn Avery Point Scuba Club.

Jumping into the ocean nearly every weekend from April to November for the past half-century, Palmer estimates he has logged more than 3,000 dives over his career, most of them in Long Island Sound and Block Island Sound, where he has been a pioneer in locating historical shipwrecks.

The Connecticut resident was among the first recreational divers on the U-853, a German submarine that prowled the Northeast and attacked several U.S. ships before being sunk by the Navy off the coast of Block Island. Palmer began searching for the sub in 1972, finding it after a year of dragging a grapple hook along the seafloor.

"I was obsessed with finding remnants of World War II in our backyard, and the biggest remnant of the war was the U-boat," he said. Over a number of dives he retrieved and restored a leather jacket, gas mask, life vest, pistol, cutlery and other items emblazoned with the swastika.

"It's history," he said. "And it's a shame just to let it rot underwater."



A mannequin stands at a submarine wheel from a WWII German U-boat wreck. Palmer retrieved the wheel along with the gear that adorns the mannequin. Photos: Stephen Kurczy

Today, those artifacts and thousands more from shipwrecks around the Northeast are displayed at Palmer's house in Wallingford. In his yard stands a 5,000-pound, 8-foot-tall, bronze propeller from the SS Black Point, which was sunk by the U-853. His TV cabinet is adorned with a sextant from the U-853 and stanchions from the passenger-freighter Grecian that sank in 1932 off Block Island. A museum-like room in Palmer's basement holds two six-foot-long bronze torpedo tubes from the USS L-8, sunk in 1926 off Narragansett. Also on display are dishware from the USS Onondaga, rock-encrusted silverware from the steamer Atlantic and teak shutters from the Italian ocean liner Andrea Doria, which lays 250 feet deep about 50 miles off the coast of Nantucket and has been the scene of numerous diver deaths over the decades.

The dangers of wreck diving don't always end once the diver resurfaces. While cleaning the German pistol found on the U-853, Palmer accidentally triggered a bullet's primer, and bits of metal backfired into his face. "I had my head in a vise for what seemed like an eternity while a doctor dug the shrapnel out of my eye," says the former Army paratrooper.

Palmer, who continues to dive in his mid-70s, maintains that all his artifacts have been legally obtained, either in international waters or prior to the 1988 Abandoned Shipwrecked Law, which says that all wrecks within three miles of the U.S. coast belong to the government. "I am preserving a piece of our coastal history," he said.

—Stephen Kurczy

MORE INFORMATION:

<https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2017/08/02/the-lures-and-dangers-of-diving-to-the-andrea-doria/>