

Award for Outstanding Achievement

U-505

HISTORY CAPTURED

by Liucija Ambrosini

Three hundred feet from one of the world's largest inland bodies of water in an underground, climate-controlled hall, the U-505, the only German submarine captured during WWII, has a new home within the Museum of Science and Industry (MSI) in Chicago. Beneath a grassy field where people like to fly kites in the summer, a 35,000-square-foot exhibit space is devoted to showcasing the last remaining Type IX-C sub in the world.

MSI has been developing themed environments since opening its doors in 1933 with the ever-popular coal mine tour. So when it was decided to bring the U-boat indoors, MSI took the opportunity to make this National Historic Landmark the centerpiece of a world-class attraction. The result is an immersive experience that helps visitors grasp an important period of world history. An elaborate team effort developed an exhibit that explores the World War II Battle of the Atlantic and re-enacts events leading up to and including the dramatic capture of the submarine. The significance of the event, the technology discovered on the U-boat, the victory itself and what life was like aboard the submarine are all delivered in a compelling presentation.

Exposed to the harsh Chicago weather for almost half a century, the U-boat first underwent a major restoration. More than 1,000 hours were spent in repairing and welding the vessel to ready it for its 1,000-foot land-trip from one side of the museum to the other. The move itself, made over the course of several days, involved several 90-degree turns and finally, painstakingly, lowering the 700-ton sub 42 feet down into its new quarters.

Visitors pass through a series of galleries before encountering the U-boat itself. Entering the first hall, one is immediately surrounded by events of the war. Dramatic music plays as the voice of Bill Kurtis narrates and sets the time period. Front pages of newspapers from all over the country line the left wall as headlines blare and mark the milestones of war: "WAR

BEGINS!" "HITLER STRIKES AGAIN!" "WAR! OAHU BOMBED BY JAPANESE PLANES!" On the right is a mural, "The World At War" - the first of four panoramas showing the ocean and ships in battle.

Soundscapes are effectively used in the galleries leading to the sub. Evocative voices: familiar, legendary - Murrow, Churchill, others - fill the air, blend with popular music of the time, and then linger and fade like so many memories. A timeline titled "U-Boats Attack The Merchant Ships" demonstrates the need to mount an offensive. It shows columns of silhouettes representing all the individual ships destroyed in each year of the war and culminating in the carnage of 1942 with over 1,100 sunk. "The Battle of the Atlantic" and "The Plan of Action" murals add scope and urgency. Descending the long staircase into the "Top Secret Submarine Tracking Room," visitors pass iconic posters, i.e. "Loose Lips

Might Sink Ships" and period artifacts. Special effects add drama. In a captivating scene, behind scrim walls and a map of the Atlantic the life-size figures of videotaped live actors are projected and seem to move and speak in real time as visitors watch events unfold. Elsewhere, sounds of battle are bolstered by floor vibrations.

The exhibit is designed so that focus alternates from left to right, pulling visitors ever more deeply into the story in almost cinematic fashion. Visitors are drawn through spaces and around corners from an overview to ever-more specific events. They are being primed for an inevitable confrontation. Ahead, a long mural depicts the scene of the boarding party on the U-505. Historic photos of each member are displayed in front of it. Taking a few steps toward this, visitors round a corner to find themselves in a mighty cavern, nose-to-nose with the prow of the submarine.



On the U-505 submarine, the crew shared space with WMDs.



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Visitors enter the vast hall at the top and view the 252-foot-long submarine from above. The cherished prize has been fully restored to its original colors and completely refurbished. Quiet, powerful music fills the space. The hall and the boat are painted in shades of gray. The submarine looks almost ethereal in its suspended beauty. The stately scale of the space, the colors, and the music envelop it in a dignified serenity.

All focus is now on the sub. The walls of the long hall angle out at the top and huge, arched beams vault across the gigantic space. Indirect lighting illuminates the walls at the top and the light spill softens and melts into shadows below. Wide, carpeted ramps allow visitors to descend completely around and then below the submarine. It seems to float, enveloped in a sea of dramatic turquoise blue and white lighting.

In an optional, onboard tour, 20 visitors at a time are guided through the narrow quarters and hear the story of the capture. The interior has been completely and authentically restored. Crew bunks share space with torpedoes. A tiny galley makes even the smallest New York apartment kitchen seem ridiculously spacious. The intense living and work quarters attest to the harsh conditions and the physical ballet that 59 men would have had to perform on a daily basis merely to exist, let alone do battle. A phonograph pipes in German ballads and classical music representing actual phonograph records found on board. The gentle music is in stark contrast to the function of the vessel.

Then visitors are plunged into the terror of

battle. Suspense builds as red, blue, and yellow lights flash warnings. The sounds of depth charges being dropped are followed by silence as visitors imagine the crew freezing, hoping to escape detection from above. The sounds of rumbling engines, torpedoes firing, sudden explosions and a carefully-crafted script are used to create the vivid simulation.

Following the onboard tour is an area of displays with over 200 artifacts, interactive stations and challenges. Crack The Code and Dive Trainer, among others, help explain and demonstrate how a submarine like U-505 could navigate the seas and avoid detection during the war. The final parts of the exhibit are devoted to both the captains and their reconciliatory meeting, and the last journeys of the U-505: first to Chicago in 1954 and then into its current location at the museum. A tribute to all 2,200 members of the Task Force, the Merchant Marines, the WAVES and the crew of U-505 completes the tour.

A sensitive combination of timing, pace, suspense, drama, special effects, visual and emotional content, music, sound, and storytelling are used to capture and communicate an era of great significance - one that relatively few people now living have directly experienced. People are touched by its look and its immediacy. It is fitting that this museum, which began its existence as the Palace of Fine Arts for the 1893 Columbian Exposition, should so embrace design, music and theatrical elements to present this fine exhibit.

