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April 2024

The Coastal  Star

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## Along the Coast



# A view from the home front



TOP: The letterhead from the Boca Raton Army Air Field illustrates the use of radar to protect Florida from German attacks. ABOVE: Peter Barrett, in a uniform his mother sewed for him, stands with his sister, Martha, near their home in Boca Raton during the war. Photos provided by the Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum

### For a boy on Boca's coast, World War II was exciting; exhibit reveals time of subs and spies

By Ron Hayes

Late one night in May 1942, an 8-year-old boy was blown awake by an explosion off Boca Raton so loud and so close, for a moment he thought he'd been thrown from his bed.



Barrett

This is not the sort of thing a person is likely to forget, and 82 years later, Peter Barrett has not forgotten.

"My dad said something got torpedoed offshore, so we went out and sure enough, there was this huge tanker totally on fire," he says.

Between February and May that year, German U-boats sank 16 merchant ships off the coast of Florida and crippled even more. The "U" stood for *Unterwasser*, Hitler's submarines prowling the Gulf Stream to destroy merchant vessels ferrying supplies to Allied forces.

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**SEAFOOD MARKET**

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- Live or Cooked Lobster & Crab
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- Lobster Cakes
- Crab Cakes
- Fresh Fish
- Cooked Shrimp
- Fine Wine & Cheeses
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Now in Season

*Happy Passover*  
Enjoy Live & Cooked *Lobsters*  
Cooked Jumbo *Shrimp Cocktail*  
*Maine Lobster Tails*



## WAR

from page AT1

On May 8, for example, the Ohioan, a freighter hauling ore, licorice root and wool, was hit off Boca by the U-564 and sank in 550 feet of water. Fifteen of its 37 crew members drowned.

"Yes, I suppose that might have been the one," Barrett says. "I can't say that for sure, but every day we'd walk the beach looking for flotsam and jetsam from the attacks. We never found a body, and we never found a lifeboat. Mostly we found the contents of ships that had been sunk."

One day Peter's father, Hollis Barrett, found a Maxwell House coffee can.

Today, that crushed blue can, still unopened, rests in a glass case at the Schmidt Boca Raton History Museum, a tiny souvenir from a very big war that affected both Florida and Boca Raton far more than too many Floridians realize.

The horror and heroism of that war are on display at the museum through May 17 in both "Florida in World War II," a traveling exhibit from the Museum of Florida History in Tallahassee, and the Schmidt Museum's permanent exhibit on Boca in the war years.

### What you'll see

"What happened here changed the course of the war," says Susan Gillis, the museum's curator. "The war affected all of Florida, and this exhibit shows that."

Spend an hour and count the number of times you murmur, "I didn't know that!"

You'll see the small lead sailor and soldier toys Peter Barrett played with as a child.

You'll see the official pen his mother, Jessie, used to take notes when she and Peter took a Friday shift in the Aircraft Warning Service watchtower, where Red Reef Park stands today, scanning the skies for German planes.

You'll see the model of a Mustang fighter plane that hung from the watchtower's ceiling, one of several German and Allied model planes dangling there to help the volunteers identify what they saw.

And at the museum on May 16, you'll see Peter Barrett, sharing his memories of the boy he was in 1942 and the war that boy saw here.

He is Dr. Peter Barrett, now 89 and retired from the UCLA school of medicine, where he was both a physician and researcher.

"We were living in Los Angeles then and had never been to Florida until my grandmother became ill in 1939," he explains. "We sold our house, packed up a big trailer and headed for Florida."

The population of Boca Raton was about 750 people at most.

Barrett's grandfather had built the Boca Raton Villas, four small vacation cottages that stood just south of Palmetto



**ABOVE:** Officers prepare for an inspection on the grounds of the Boca Raton Club, which the Army leased for two years to house troops during construction of the Boca Raton Army Air Field.

**INSET BELOW:** The Flying Pelican was the airfield's mascot. The lightning emanating from its head represents radar, a new technology in which airfield personnel trained. **Photos provided by the Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum and the Museum of Florida History**

### If You Go

**What:** "Florida in World War II," a traveling exhibit from the Museum of Florida History, as well as a permanent exhibit highlighting Boca Raton in World War II.

**Where:** Schmidt Boca Raton History Museum, 71 N. Federal Highway, Boca Raton.

**When:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday, through May 17.

**Cost:** \$12 for adults; \$8 for students and seniors 65 and older. Admission is free on the first Saturday of each month. For information about the exhibit and Peter Barrett's May 16 appearance, call 561-395-6766.



The exhibit honors the men and women who served in WWII.

Park Road on a single-lane tar road. The Barretts lived in the southernmost cottage.

A hundred yards north was Mrs. Dixon's house and just to the south the unoccupied Sanborn house, a palatial mansion surrounded by a wall. That was all, Barrett says, for 8 miles in either direction.

About 2 a.m. one June night, the family was awakened by a knocking at the door. Hollis Barrett was away. Peter's mother, sister and he were alone, peering out at two military men from the air base, with another half dozen standing beyond, jeeps and

motorcycles and rifles greeting them.

"Have you been using any lights to signal out to sea?" a soldier asked them.

"No," his mother replied, "but just north is Mrs. Dixon. "Maybe she was."

"She's the one who phoned us," the soldier said.

And the soldiers moved on to the empty Sanborn house, where they found used towels, beds slept in, trash on the floor, a telescope in the bay window facing the ocean, and a blinking signal machine used to alert U-boats of approaching merchant ships. Today, a plaque erected by the city in 2005 graces the



last remaining piece of the Sanborns' wall, on a pedestrian right of way between the current Beresford and Excelsior condominiums.

*On this spot in June 1942, spies from German U-boats landed and occupied Dr. William Sanborn's home built on this site in 1937.*

Gillis, the curator, doubts the spies came ashore from a U-boat, but vouches for Barrett's tale of the spies next door. Barrett's father had become friendly with the FBI agent in town, who filled him in, and his older sister also remembers the night the soldiers came to call.

"The Sanborns sold their house and went back to Detroit," Barrett says, "so nobody in town knew about the spies next door. You'll hear there were no spies south of Jacksonville. Well, it ain't so."

In 1946, the Barretts returned to Los Angeles. Peter was 11 then, and wouldn't see Boca Raton again until December 2004, when he made a sentimental journey back to Boca while visiting cousins in Miami. He found condos where his wartime villa had been, and he found the Boca Raton Historical Society. Barrett will be 90 when he comes here again on May 16, a still spry and very articulate gentleman, with stories to tell and an old blue coffee can to revisit.

"It was fun," he says now of those days when Boca Raton was a small town and he a small boy. "It was exciting. But no kid really knows what a war is about. Kids are excited by soldiers marching about and doing things, and I was a kid." ★

### I didn't know that!

"World War II was here," says Mary Csar, executive director of the Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum. "We forget that. It was here."

- When the U.S. entered the war in 1941, there were eight military installations in Florida. When the war ended four years later, there were 175.

- One of those bases was the Boca Raton Army Air Field, which provided the only training for a new and top-secret technology called radar, which could identify enemy aircraft at a range of 80 miles, giving early warning of German air attacks.
- Mentioning the word "radar" off-base could be a court-martial offense.

- During the war, Boca Raton had a population of about 750, but played host to between 50,000 and 100,000 servicemen and women stationed at its air base.

- For two years, Addison Mizner's famed Boca Raton Club was used as U.S. Army barracks while the airfield was being built.

- Today, the former airfield's 5,860 acres are occupied by Boca Raton Airport and Florida Atlantic University.
- Food and gas were rationed in Boca Raton, and no lights could be seen from windows and doors at night.
- 4,600 Floridians died in military service during the war, and thousands more were wounded or permanently disabled.

Sources: Boca Raton Historical Society & Museum and the Museum of Florida History