Film Shows How Chatham Crews Helped Turn The Tide In 'Battle Of The Atlantic'

by Alan Pollock

CHATHAM—A bulwark of confidence for his besieged countrymen during the second World War, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill later admitted that one thing that truly frightened him was the U-boat peril. With England bracing itself for possible invasion and buying time until the U.S. joined the war, German submarines were destroying their very lifeline across the Atlantic. A new short film produced for the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center shows how a small group of young people in sleepy Chatham helped turn the tide of the Battle of the Atlantic.

"It was a hotbed of activity for a small town," said veteran broadcaster Ed Fouhy, who produced and directed the film. With the Marconi center serving as a very important naval intelligence operation, plus two Coast Guard installations and a secret Army research effort in town, "there was a very, very important contribution to the war effort by the people of Chatham," Fouhy said.

The commercial ship-to-shore wireless station built by Marconi was commandeered by the U.S. Navy during the war, its large antennas and receivers put to use detecting and tracking radio signals between U-boats and the German submarine command. The enemy was unaware that Polish and British mathematicians had cracked their code and invented a primitive computer that allowed them to "read the mail" of Admiral Karl Doenitz. Each night, the submarines would surface to receive instructions from their base, or would relay their own reports.

"Little did they know—and Admiral Doenitz didn't realize it until years and years later, after the war ended—that every transmission was being read by the Allies. Many of the transmissions were monitored here in Chatham,"

In a round-the-clock operation, Navy personnel in Chatham monitored offshore radio traffic and forwarded it for decoding. CMMC PHOTO
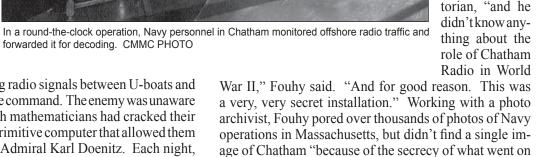
Fouhy said.

Using directional antennas, the Chatham crew could get a bearing on the transmissions, which were triangulated using bearings from other shoreside stations to provide a rough location of the submarines for attack planes or destroyers.

The film, which is a little over seven minutes in length, was edited by longtime local filmmaker Christopher Seufert of Mooncusser Films, whom Fouhy described as a creative, patient professional and an excellent partner. For Seufert, working with Fouhy was a real opportunity.

"Since Ed was a producer for Walter Cronkite, going way back to their time in Vietnam, working with Ed as the writer/director provided great continuity to my previous Marconi Maritime documentary, which was narrated by Cronkite," Seufert said. "It was similarly a learning experience for me as a documentary maker."

Fouhy started research on the project last fall, after other business took him to Washington, D.C. He visited the office of the U.S. Navy Historian, "and he didn't know anything about the role of Chatham Radio in World War II," Fouhy said. "And for good reason. This was a very, very secret installation." Working with a photo archivist, Fouhy pored over thousands of photos of Navy operations in Massachusetts, but didn't find a single image of Chatham "because of the secrecy of what went on here."

The short film is part of the World War II exhibit inside the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center, which opened for the season this week. The center's various exhibits and displays have been improved and reconfigured for 2011, providing visitors with a clearer understanding of

Ed Fouhy produced and directed a short film for the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center on Chatham's role in the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. The film had its debut last week. ALAN POLLOCK PHOTO

the ship-to-shore radio process. Special new displays, including a replica general store and telegraph office, have been crafted by the Harwich Newcomers' Club, the same craftsmen who built the museum's display rails.

Seufert said he hopes someday this short film will be part of a larger feature film that will include the Cronkite film produced for CMMC in 2004. "All of these scripts are successive parts of the larger story, that should some day flicker in the dark for people as one cohesive movie," Seufert said.

One of the greatest challenges in producing this video was keeping it to a manageable length, Fouhy said.

"This is a story that you could spend an hour or two telling," he said, but the goal was to make a movie that would be seen by people who were standing at the Navy exhibit. "Also, I wanted to make sure that it appealed to children," Fouhy said. For both reasons, the film had to be short.

"It just skips across the surface of a wonderful story of a battle that took the lives of over 30,000 seamen on both sides, and lasted for six years," Fouhy said.

See a video report on this project at www.CapeCodChronicle.com.

U.S. Navy buses shuttled servicemen from the Hawthorne Inn, where they were billeted, to the Marconi campus in Chathamport. CMMC PHOTO