At Natick museum, World War II feels all too real
With 10,000 artifacts and half a million documents, it plans to expand

By Steve Maas
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It is not the Sherman tank, nor the mannequin of Hitler dressed in his actual brownshirt uniform, nor the chess board that concentration camp inmates made from rye bread that pops up over and over in student feedback forms about their visit to the International Museum of World War II in Natick.

Rather, it is a German field surgery kit containing saws that amputated the arms and legs of scores of soldiers.

"There's reality here. It's not a game," said Kenneth Rendell, the museum's founder and director. The students "get a sense of relating to soldiers."

Rendell, who was born in Somerville in 1943 and now lives in Dover, has collected 10,000 World War II artifacts and a half-million documents. Many are crowded into a one-story building incongruously located a block behind Dick's Sporting Goods off of Route 9.

The nonprofit plans to break ground next spring on a two-story structure with three times the exhibition space and a floor for scholars to pore through the massive paperwork left behind by a war that killed 60 million people. The building, located next to the existing one, is expected to open in 2019, the 20th anniversary of the museum.

With more spacious quarters, the museum will be able to expand its public hours, which now are mainly on Saturdays because school groups crowd the aisles during the week.

The museum will also be able to show much more of its collection, including a 75-foot-long Mobile Army

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The museum was founded by Kenneth W. Rendell (above, in a medical tent). Artifacts include the flight jacket (above) of Kathryn Bernheim, one of the first female military pilots; a chess set made by concentration camp inmates; and a German code machine.
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Surgical Hospital tent. The only one known to remain from World War II, the MASH unit includes two operating theaters, X-ray equipment, a dental chair, and a straightjacket.

“That one display”—like the German surgery kit—“is going to transmit personal tragedy,” Rendell said. “On those operating tables people died, lost their limbs.”

What you won’t find in the new building are multimedia displays that attempt to recreate the experience of combat.

“You will never know anxiety, because you’re not living under fear that you’re going to get killed in two minutes or tomorrow, or that your father or your husband is going to get killed,” Rendell said. “There’s no way to relate that.”

What you will see—and touch, smell, and hear—are artifacts from battle and home front across the world. You can crank air sirens, decode messages with a German Enigma machine, and peer through binoculars salvaged from the USS Arizona.

You can pick up a Thompson submachine gun (surprisingly heavy), touch a French bridal gown made from a parachute, or read the Manila diary of one of General Douglas MacArthur’s top aides. (“Started war on a peanut butter sandwich, busy day.”)

What else sets this museum apart from others about World War II is that it spans the entire world and puts the conflict in its historical context.

“You can’t understand World War II without understanding what was going on in Germany, what was going on in France, and what’s going on in Japan and China,” Rendell said. “This museum is about causes and consequences. In no way do we dumb down the museum. It’s complex, just like the war was complex.”

The museum mixes original documents (the first telegraph out of Hawaii: “AIR RAID ON PEARL HARBOR, THIS IS NO DRILL”) with personal mementos—a Hawaiian photograph album assembled by a soldier killed at Guadalcanal. It depicts the machinery of war (the autopilot of a V1 rocket) and persecution (a Zyclon B label from a gas chamber) alongside vestiges of the victims (a wooden prosthetic hand from the Lodz Ghetto).

Whenever possible, Rendell asked the children of war leaders to pick out the eye colors for mannequins. Many of the models are dressed in their genuine clothing, including Churchill in the trademark one-piece siren suit he wore.
With photographs, art, letters, and diaries, the museum humanizes both the allies and the enemies. For example, a group photo depicts the Japanese officers who planned the Pearl Harbor attack, taken just three weeks before it occurred.

An exhibit on US internment camps, on the other hand, includes the story of a Japanese-American family that spent the war behind barbed wire while their son fought for the United States. A telegram on display informs his interned wife that he had been wounded.

Like the current museum, the new one will direct visitors through a series of rooms that follow the war chronologically. It begins with the end of World War I and the Versailles Treaty, which Rendell, like many other historians, maintains planted the seeds for the next war. It ends with the Nuremberg trials and Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem.

The room on the rise of Nazism is an unnerving case study in marketing: Hitler is depicted in posters as swaggering savior, and in cards and tiny children’s books as a friend to toddlers, dogs, and deer. Meanwhile, examples of vilely illustrated children’s books show how anti-Semitic propagandist Julius Streicher poisoned minds, young and old alike.

Board games emblazoned with swastikas jolted Robert Trestan, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League’s New England office. “They used the board games as a way to normalize the symbol of the Nazi government,” Trestan said.

“One of the questions about the Holocaust that people often ask is how did this happen? How did seemingly normal people become mass murderers? The artifacts in this museum help tell this story,” said Trestan, who said he was so impressed by the institution that he held a board meeting there.

Displayed along with a soundtrack of German martial music are a statue of a Nazi eagle and a swastika from the speaker’s stand at the Nuremberg Rally grounds (both shipped to the United States by General George S. Patton), and Nazi parade standards emblazoned with “Germany Awake.”

“I want to give a sense here of what Germans were looking at,” Rendell said. “You march down the street, and you’re caught up in the pageantry.” But the last thing he wants is for the exhibit to become a shrine to Nazism. In fact, he said, on several occasions he rebuffed requests by a Holocaust denier to visit the museum. Rendell said he feared that the man would write about the museum in a way that would attract neo-Nazi followers.

The Holocaust exhibit includes mannequins of SS soldiers and Gestapo agents, faceless because Rendell wanted the focus to be on their intimidating uniforms. But he dignified the victims by showing who they were and how they struggled: a mother and daughter sent to Ravensbrück, accused of being in the French resistance; a slave laborer from Belgium whose model was made from his image and is dressed in his striped camp uniform.

“I wanted everything in your face,” Rendell said. “I wanted this area to be claustrophobic. I wanted this area to be disturbing. I don’t want it to feel good.”

KENNETH RENDELL
Referring to a Holocaust exhibit

letters. In 1983, hired by Newsweek and Stern magazines, he helped expose the Hitler diary hoax.

He has written eight books, the latest being “The Power of Anti-Semitism: The March to the Holocaust, 1919-1939.” National Geographic has contracted to compile three books based on the Natick collection. The first, “The Secret History of World War II: Spies, Code Breakers & Covert Operations,” was published last year.

Rendell estimates the museum project will cost $26 million. Much of the money has already been raised, he said, about 75 percent of it from outside New England.

The new building will have to be constructed around some of the exhibits, such as that Sherman tank, which helped drive the Germans from North Africa and had been refitted for a possible invasion of Japan.

As he mobilizes for the move, Rendell can relate to Eisenhower’s preparations for D-Day.

All the more fitting, then, that the museum is scheduled to open on the great battle’s 75th anniversary, June 6, 2019.

Visit museumofworldwar1.org.

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