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Warship history still alive thanks to Q-C men

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By **Brian Krans, bkrans@qconline.com**

Sometimes, George White wonders why he has an interest in landing ship tanks (LSTs) considering his shaky past with the vessels.

When he was 19, he was aboard one that a Japanese kamikazee pilot crashed into outside Okinawa. The majority of the ship survived, but the 55-gallon drums of gas they had on board provided some difficulties.

“They caught on fire and ammunition was going off,” Mr. White, now 82 said. “We were ultimately told to abandon it.”

The World War II vet who lives in Coal Valley did anything but abandon a different 66-year-old LST. He helped resurrect the archaic vessel.

The USS LST 325 stormed the beaches on D-Day, led campaigns in North Africa, Salerno and Sicily, toured the Antarctic and rotted off the Greek island of Crete.

To say the least, LST 325 had some history. It’s not only part of the nation’s history, but also Quad-Cities history.

Beginning Aug. 28, the LST 325 will be docked in Moline for all to visit. Getting it there took three Quad-Cities men going to Europe seven years ago and a father and son duo to pilot it here.

In 2001, Don Chapman of Carbon Cliff, Roald Zvonik, of Moline, and Mr. White saved the vessel from becoming just another chunk of rusted ocean feed.

After serving its many tours, the LST 325 was sold to the Greek Navy. After they were done with it, the three Quad-Cities area men wanted to refurbish it and sail it home.



Photo: submitted

The USS LST 325, shown here, will be on exhibit starting Thursday in the Quad-Cities.



Photo: submitted

George White poses off the coast of Sicily on the USS LST 325 while helping bring the ship back to the United States from Greece in 2001.

What they got was a rusted, holey, barely running ship just like one each had served on during World War II, either on the crew or as one of the Marines being thrown onto the beach.

The crew cannibalized parts from another Greek LST castoff moored nearby, patched gaping, rusty holes, overhauled the engines, painted the hull and had her ready for sea trials in October 2001.

After a test cruise, the men faced opposition from both the U.S. State Department and the Greek government.

In the end, they prevailed, saving a core piece of war history and docking it in Mobile, Ala., after a months-long, arduous journey through rough seas.

This is the last working LST on record, and members of the ship's original crew are still alive.

The nearest to the Quad-Cities is Ellsworth Easterly of Litchfield, Ill. At 94 years old, the former engine-room worker doesn't do interviews.

"He never talked about it too much," his son, Jim Easterly, said. "I know the people of the Quad-Cities will really enjoy seeing it."

Getting it to the Quad-Cities is the job of John W. Vize of East Moline and son John H. Vize, a Moline native.

Last year, John H. Vize, a captain who normally tows boats, volunteered to take the LST-325 on tour along the Mississippi River. This year, he asked his dad to come along for the three-day trip from Hannibal, Mo.

"I thought it was a great father-son bonding thing," the elder Mr. Vize said. "We're both masochists, for lack of a better term. There's a certain pride in running a big ship. It takes a certain amount of skill."

John W. Vize operates Great River Tours in LeClaire. Although he's more used to piloting a small, 4,000-pound boat, piloting a 4,000-ton retired warship shouldn't be too different, he said.

"I guess a boat is a boat," he said. "This one, however, has been around. It's got some stories."

If you go:

What: Tours of the USS LST 325

When: Thursday through Sept. 2, with tours from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Where: Moline, next to the Celebration Belle near Interstate 74

How much: \$10 for adults, \$5 children younger than 17. \$20 for family ticket -- parents plus children younger than 17.

For more info: www.lstmemorial.org/

