

Museum of World War II

Near Boston, More than 6,000 Artifacts Put History into Unforgettable Perspective

Text by Gerald Clarke/Photography by Richard Mandelkorn



WE ALL KNOW HOW it began: German troops goose-stepping down the Champs-Élysées and Japanese dive-bombers swooping down on American battleships at Pearl Harbor. We also know how it concluded, with Hitler dead in his bunker and mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. What we often forget, however, is exactly how people lived and fought in between and how, but for some lucky breaks for the United States

and its allies, the finish might have been altogether different. Here to remind us is a small but remarkably complete museum just outside Boston.

The Museum of World War II is the work of just one man: Kenneth W. Rendell, a dealer in historical letters and documents, who started collecting when he was 12 years old. Rendell has a gallery on Madison Avenue and an office in Boston. Documents are his business, but World War II is

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"Many museums have preserved airplanes, but not maps, survival equipment and clothing," Kenneth W. Rendell says of his Museum of World War II in Natick, Massachusetts. TOP: The Battle of Britain is commemorated. ABOVE: The telegram sent from Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and a French Resistance spy camera made from German electrical components.



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his passion. Born in 1943, he is too young to remember the war itself, but it towered over his boyhood and adolescence. “For people my age it was the defining event,” he says.

Rendell’s World War II collection started, naturally enough, with documents. It was only in 1990, at an auction to benefit Royal Air Force veterans, that he began acquiring the myriad other artifacts that now populate his museum. “The auction was a gold mine,” he says. “Pilots who had fought in the Battle of Britain donated whatever they had, and I bought all kinds of stuff, from uniforms to a homemade scoop to pick up incendiary bombs.” Other gold mines brought other treasures: German code machines, a Sherman tank and one of only six surviving LCPV landing crafts.

Rendell decided that Natick, a few minutes west, would be a more accessible location for the museum than downtown Boston. He found just what he wanted—a building near two major highways. He rebuilt it, he says, “after visiting and studying almost every historical 20th-century museum in this country and Europe.” A 10,000-square-foot plain stucco box, it has no windows; it is meant to minimize one’s external frame of reference.

World War II: Saving the Reality is the title of Rendell’s new book about his collection, and portraying the hard, gritty reality of the war was his goal. Visitors get an up-close look at battlefronts and home



fronts, along with life in concentration camps and prisoner of war camps. Every piece is authentic, from documents with the handwriting of Hitler, Churchill and Roosevelt to the actual uniforms worn by concentration camp prisoners.

The exhibits proceed chronologically, beginning with Germany in the 1920s, before Hitler rose to power, and ending with the Japanese surrender and the Tokyo war crimes trials. In the section devoted to the Holocaust, the walkway is narrow, mimicking the confinement that millions endured every day. “I wanted the exhibit to feel cramped and in-your-face,” says Rendell. The space opens up again when the United States, with its vast resources, enters the battle.

The museum can accommodate only a limited number of arrivals at a time, and Rendell asks those interested in visiting to make appointments by phone or e-mail. Admission is free, but it is a serious museum with a serious purpose, and Rendell discourages casual visitors. “I want people to have an experience,” he says. “Apparently it works. People tell me how wonderful it is.” □

For more information, visit www.museumofworldwarii.com.



Top: “America Enters the War” focuses on the production capabilities of the United States, where automakers manufactured tanks and typewriter companies produced machine guns. **Above Right:** The French hid radios in common biscuit tins. **Above:** An original set of D-day plans for the invasion of France on June 6, 1944, annotated with the Allies’ expected positions on the eighth day.