

Chatham played a key role in World War I

Editor's note: The next two "At the Atwood" columns focus on Chatham's role in the world wars. We look at World War I today and World War II in the next column.

By Tim Weller

Chatham's role in the "war to end all wars" ended 101 years ago, and memories of those years have faded.

Not so at the Atwood House & Museum, where artifacts, photographs, and newspaper clippings preserve what Chatham was like.

World War I transformed Chatham. Seventy-eight residents out of a population of 1,667 saw uniformed duty. Seven died, including Edward S. Bearse, Chester O.T. Eldredge, Emory F. Griffin, Herbert L. Macomber, Edwin F. Nickerson, Josiah D. Nickerson, and Thomas J. Rogers.

In 1917, after a year of almost round-the-clock construction, the Chatham Naval Station opened, sprawling across 36 acres on Nickerson's Neck. One of the first such bases in the country, "NAS-C" was home to 250 men who flew and maintained dozens of seaplanes and

dirigibles. Their mission was clear: Protect U.S. shipping from a new, dangerous weapon, the German U-boat, or “undersea boat.”

The Battle of Nauset Beach

On the hazy, calm morning of Sunday, July 21, 1918, the tug *Perth Amboy*, pulling four barges, rounded Provincetown, steaming towards Elizabeth, New Jersey.

At 10:30 a.m., that calm shattered. A German U-boat, U-156, surfaced just east of the *Perth Amboy* and opened fire with its deck gun. One shell hit the Perth’s wheelhouse, igniting a fire. Capt. J.P. Tapley ordered the crew to abandon ship.

The drama unfolded before a growing crowd on Nauset Beach, wrote Joseph D. Buckley in *Wings Over Cape Cod*. Several of the U-boat’s shells landed on the beach.

“Whether accidentally or intentionally is not known,” Buckley wrote. “But they were the only enemy shells to land on United States soil... since the War of 1812.”

Minutes later reports of the attack trickled into the air station’s radio room, and commanders ordered planes armed and launched.

Ensign Eric A. Lingard flew the first plane to arrive over the scene. He targeted the U-156 amidships and released a bomb from 800 feet. No explosion. Lingard circled back, this time approaching the U-boat's stern at 400 feet. Again, nothing. Frustrated, a brave crew member, E.H. Howard, climbed out of this seat and released a third bomb with his hand. The bomb fell just short—and again did not explode.

The U-156 had had enough. She dove and eventually escaped.

Were the bombs faulty? Or duds? No one knows. Nine seaplanes in all attacked the U-156 before returning safely to base. Four months later, on Nov. 11, 1918, the Great War ended. By 1922 The Navy had abandoned NAS-C. Today, those who explore the area can still find remnants of the old base in the underbrush, but few remember what was once there.

The Atwood House & Museum is located at 347 Stage Harbor Road. The museum's phone number is (508) 945-2493 and its website is www.chathamhistoricalsociety.org. Tim Weller is a member of the Chatham Historical Society/Atwood House & Museum Board of Trustees.