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Eternal patrol

By Jill Helton

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John Crouse, director of the St. Marys Submarine Museum since its inception in 1995, died Saturday after collapsing two days earlier at the submarine veterans annual convention in Cincinnati.

Crouse, 58, suffered a heart attack and was taken to a nearby medical center, but never regained consciousness.

"If he could have scripted the final moments of his life, I don't think he could have come up with a more perfect ending than at the submarine veterans annual convention," said Keith Post, a museum plank owner and a member of its board of directors. "He lived and breathed the submarine museum. His legacy at the museum will live far beyond his years."

Crouse came from Michigan, but settled permanently in Camden County following his Navy retirement in 1992. He was trained as a machinist's mate (nuclear), served aboard fast-attack submarines and attained the rank of master chief. The USS Canopus, a submarine tender, brought him to Kings Bay, his final duty station.

Crouse was on board with the museum from the very beginning.

"It was a joy working with John to build the museum in 1995," said Sheila McNeill, a local business woman and former national president of the Navy League. "We opened in 1996, and we were almost inseparable during that year and have remained friends since then. He's joined my family many holidays."

McNeill said Crouse had a true passion for the submarine force, but had a special place in his heart for the submarine veterans of World War II.

"He had such respect for all they do and he would make sure that the museum reflected that. His 'road trips' to subvet meetings around the country gave him great pleasure," she added. "He was way too young for us to lose him."

Royal Weaver, vice president of the sub museum, said Crouse had planned his final arrangements prior to having bypass surgery last spring. True to his wishes, a memorial service will be held at St. Marys Submarine Museum later this month and he will be buried at sea.

He also requested that memorial donations to the St. Marys Submarine Museum be made in lieu of flowers.

Crouse brought his meticulous Navy standards to his civilian job, with the exception of the dress code. In fact, the only flowers he wants at his memorial service are Hawaiian leis, keeping in theme with the colorful shirts he liked to wear.

He was a casual, humble sort of person and insisted that he be called museum manager when others tried to call him curator or executive director.

He was also involved in community events and was always there to lend a helping hand, said Jerry Brandon, a former mayor who operates a hotel next to the museum.

"He was a nice guy and we will miss him. He was quiet, but dependable," Brandon said.

Weaver said it will be incredibly difficult to find someone who can run the business side of the museum, but also act as an ambassador for the museum and manage its many artifacts.

Doug Cooper, president of the submarine museum board of directors, said Crouse's presence will be missed daily at the facility.

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ST. MARYS SUBMARINE Museum manager John Crouse died Saturday just days after his arrival at the annual submarine veterans convention. He was 58. (Tribune & Georgian file photo)

"He knew every picture, every book, every artifact in that museum," Cooper said. "Whoever steps in (to replace him) will have a steep learning curve."

The irony that Crouse's final days were spent at a convention for submarine veterans is not lost on Cooper. Pictures posted Aug. 31 to Crouse's Facebook page show the table he'd set up at the convention in Cincinnati.

After Crouse collapsed at the annual convention, a group of veterans manned the convention booth he had prepared. They sold items for the museum and collected money for a scholarship in his memory. That speaks to the friendships that Crouse had fostered and the fellowship that submariners share, Weaver said.

"He definitely had a good rapport with sub vets from coast to coast," added Post. "His reach was long, far and wide in the submarine world."

Cooper also said the museum will remain open in the immediate future. Board members will soon be finalizing plans for a memorial service for Crouse at the waterfront building.

"He's the one who kept the museum alive all these years," Cooper said. "John will be missed."

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St. Marys museum manager on eternal patrol

Source URL: <http://jacksonville.com/news/georgia/2010-09-18/story/st-marys-museum-manager-eternal-patrol>

By Gordon Jackson

ST. MARYS — Hundreds gathered Friday to pay tribute to John Crouse, a retired Navy master chief who died of a heart attack Sept. 4 while promoting the St. Marys Submarine Museum at a national Navy veterans' convention in Cincinnati.

Mourners, many dressed in Hawaiian shirts and leis, gathered at Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Church to pay tribute to the only manager the St. Marys Submarine Museum has had since its creation in 1995.

Crouse, who was seldom seen wearing long pants or button-down shirts, specified in his will that he wanted everyone to wear Hawaiian garb.

The 58-year-old Michigan native and lifelong bachelor was described as the driving force behind the museum and a passionate supporter of an annual submarine veterans convention held at Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base.

Former national Navy League president Sheila McNeill chronicled his Navy career, which included tours of duty on three submarines and 13 years in Hawaii. The audience laughed as she described Crouse's claim that she taught him to be a civilian.

"He was all things Hawaiian after those years in Hawaii and proper dress to him was flip-flops and shorts," she said. "He just might put long pants on at a formal event or between January and March, but only after a lot of coercion or begging."

McNeill praised Crouse's admiration of World War II submarine veterans.

"You always knew when he was telling a sea story," she said. "He spoke with authority about the service of our WWII veterans."

McNeill's voice cracked with emotion after reading tributes to Crouse from retired admirals, veterans and those still serving in the Navy.

"Rest in peace," she said. "You stand relieved for the last time. We have the watch."

After the service, many gathered at the museum Crouse helped establish in downtown St. Marys.

"This was his love, the submarine museum," said Toby Mohrman, a retired command master chief who served with Crouse aboard the USS Canopus at Kings Bay.

Retired Capt. Bill Weisensee, former commander at Kings Bay's Trident Refit Facility, said Crouse deserves much of the credit for the museum's success.

"He meant everything," he said. "He was always here to do the job and make sure it succeeded."

Doug Cooper, the museum board's president, said it will be impossible to find a replacement who has Crouse's passion and enthusiasm.

“This wasn’t a job for John: it was his life,” Cooper said. “He was the museum.”

St. Marys Councilman Keith Post, a retired sailor, will be the museum’s interim manager for the next six months.

“The best thing I can do is keep the doors open and keep the museum moving forward in a positive way,” Post said.

Crouse’s remains were cremated and will be buried at sea during a ceremony aboard one of the Trident submarines at Kings Bay, McNeill said.

She shared some of the comments Crouse wrote in his will.

“Well, if you are reading this it looks like I’ve completed my last transfer of duty,” he wrote. “Eternal patrol is a submarine term used by subvets who have departed on their last eternal patrol. Sometimes I still act like a kid, which I think is why I had so much fun in the Navy.”

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