

## Wreck

Continued from page A1

iously awaiting the arrival.

Jim, 61, also a Navy veteran, said he wanted to experience the historic moment with his son by diving down with him, but due to his asthma and age he didn't feel he could. However, he still wanted to join in on the journey.

Peterson brought along several of his associates from Atlantic Divers, who were all amazed by the story. Cassway and Sullivan of the Explorer said even though they have been to the Jones wreckage countless times, this particular dive was by far the most meaningful. Cassway said the multiple explosions that took place on the ship scattered the wreckage across nearly two miles of ocean floor. They wanted to see the largest and most recognizable part of the ship, which is a portion of the midsection and stern.

As they headed out to sea from Utsch's Marina, the Tidwells, divers and boat crew shared stories about past diving experiences and asked Eric questions about his career as a fighter pilot. They talked about the dive and came up with a dive plan along the way. When they finally arrived, they suited up and got to work. Guide ropes were tied to the Explorer and the wreckage so it was easier for divers during their return. As Eric got ready, he could only imagine what he was going to see at the end of those ropes.

"It's going to be a surreal experience - I know that much," he said right before diving in.

While he spent the next half-hour or so examining the wreckage, Jim sat on the boat deck anxiously awaiting his son's return and the stories of what he had seen. Jim couldn't believe he was in the exact location his father nearly met his fate so many years ago.

"It was a feeling of being there and realizing that morning it was the difference between me being here and

not," he said. "If he hadn't survived, no one in my family would be here."

Jim said his father was just in his early 20s the morning of the attack. It was before Paul had even become acquainted with his wife, who he met on leave just weeks after the attack.

Paul, who was unable to take the trip out to sea, said an experience like that truly makes you appreciate life more. Since that time, he found love and raised a family he is forever grateful for.

Upon Eric's arrival from the wreckage, Jim helped him aboard and immediately began asking questions. Eric said the ship was so mangled and torn apart, it was difficult to tell what it even was without being told beforehand. He said he had been building up the moment in his head but realized before the dive that the Jacob Jones had been down there since 1942 and the condition of the ship would be extremely hard to imagine considering the corroded metal and damage done to the vessel.

"You see all this twisted metal and you put your hands on it - it gets you thinking," he said. "To think about what happened to a bunch of 20-year-olds and how they dealt with it. I'm 40 now and I don't even know how I would have dealt with something like that if it happened to me."

Eric said he would see his grandfather a couple days later, and the first thing he was going to say to his grandfather would simply be, "Thank you."

He said it was devastating to know that Paul went through something so terrifying and tragic, but somehow kept moving on.

Paul said there were two things that kept him alive that morning as he fought through the explosions, the sight of fallen comrades and bitter cold waters - the first being his faith. He said he was raised Methodist and with that religious background and



understanding, he never let go of his conviction. The second was his family back home. Paul had his mother along with two brothers and four sisters at the time, and those thoughts of home were inspiration enough to never give up. His two brothers, Thurman and Robert were both serving in the military at the same time. Thurman was in the Air Force while Robert was in the Army's 10th Mountain Division.

"I had an amazing mother who raised great kids," he said. "I wanted to see them again."

Eric and Jim both said Paul appreciated them making the trip out to the wreckage and was surprised by their strong interest in the story.

"It's a very proud time for him and it means everything to Dad," Jim said.

They were worried about Paul's reaction to the photos and stories they would bring back with them - concerned that he wouldn't be able to handle reliving the experience, but to their surprise, he was extremely honored they made the dive. The rest of the family was anxious to hear about the expedition as well. Joe and Janet, who arrived with Paul in Cape May on Sunday, said it was very special to them. Joe is another Tidwell who served his country in the Naval Reserve and then enlisted in the Army. He said there has been someone in the family serving their country ever since 1940 and he is very proud of that fact.

"We envision the service to our country as something we needed to do, and are honored to do," he said. "We enjoy the



Cain Chamberlin/Cape May Star and Wave

Above left, the Research Vessel (RV) Explorer in its slip at Utsch's Marina. Top right, Eric Tidwell is assisted by Steve Lagreca before his dive. Above, the diving team included, standing, Gene Peterson, Bart Malone, Steve Gatto, Eric Tidwell, his father Jim Tidwell, and Brian Sullivan, Kneeling are Steve Lagreca, Rusty Cassway and John Copeland.

friendship, fellowship and camaraderie the military has within it."

"There were so many great men that were a part of Dad's generation and they did so much for the history of our country," Joe said.

Janet expressed her gratitude to Eric for not only taking the dive and allowing her to be a part of the experience by bringing back video and photos, but also for his service to his country knowing what the other men in his family had been through.

"For Eric to follow in the footsteps of his dad and granddad in the Navy is just so honorable," she said.

Looking through the pictures, she said they were wip-

ing away tears quite often and trying to imagine the magnitude of the situation Paul had endured.

"We've been having a lot of what they like to call 'Hallmark moments,'" Janet said.

On Sunday, the entire family visited the WWII watchtower near Cape May Point. Numerous veterans came to witness the moment as Paul came back to the area that sheltered him in a time of tragedy. He said it was nothing like he remembers, but still a great place and he was so happy to be there. Paul said he was astonished to meet Lower Township resident James Rodan at the tower. Rodan is a Navy veteran who was one of the people Paul met in the Cape May diner where the survivors ate on that February morning.

Joe said these are the types of stories that need to live on, as well as the memory of those who have perished. He hopes whatever articles and stories are written about moments like these will gen-

erate interest from younger generations so the same stories can be told down the road.

Local historian Robert Heinley, who writes the Victorian Views column for the Star and Wave, said there are dozens of ships lying at the bottom of the Atlantic, not far from the New Jersey and Delaware coastlines, which were sunk by German torpedoes.

"It wasn't a daily occurrence, but it wasn't rare either," he said.

He said the USS Jacob Jones was the first American warship to be sunk by enemy attack after Pearl Harbor, and to see one of the survivors return to Cape May was simply incredible.

"People don't realize how big and tragic of an event that was," he said. "Some don't even know it happened."

## Museum

Continued from page A1

"In addition to the heritage, we are looking at the marine sciences," he said.

Maloney said the Haskins Lab of Rutgers University's Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences is doing wonderful research related to Delaware Bay oysters and other shellfish. He said the institute did research on how bacteria being pumped out of the bilges of ships had decimated the oyster population. The university partnered with Atlantic Cape Fisheries to farm oysters in the bay. A process developed speeds the maturation process for oysters from 60 months to 18.

Maloney said they have also been talking about involving the Bayshore Discovery Project, operators of the A.J. Meerwald tall sailing ship. The 1928 schooner is a restored oyster dredger.

Also included, hopefully, would be the Traditional Small Craft Association, which could provide information on how small boats are built.

"We want people to look at the museum and aquaculture and say it's really informational, informative, and fun," he said.

Maloney said they are also trying to involve local divers, who have been diving shipwrecks off the Jersey coast, and who have recovered numerous artifacts. Local contractor and diver Brian Sullivan was recently invited to join the board of directors.

Maloney said they have a architect who has volunteered to design the new proposed museum. He said the organization does not have the money to proceed with its ideas not, but he believes supporters of the project will help fund it. Maloney said he is asking the city to consider allowing a trailer on the proposed site as a startup center. Eventually, the museum/education center's board envisions a campus that is linked to the Nature Center and Marine Sciences lab.

Anyone interested in volunteering or supporting the project should call Maloney at 609-412-1250.

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