

Providence Berth for a Relic of the Cold War

Twenty years ago, the appearance of a Soviet submarine a mile from downtown Providence would have produced panic and possibly an international crisis. But with the Cold War a thing of the past, you can now tour an actual Soviet sub, the Juliett 484, which is moored near the Port of Providence.

Visitors to the Russian Sub Museum at Collier Point Park can explore the radar and sonar rooms on the Juliett 484 and a small area where a KGB officer once gave civics lessons. They can sit in the modest captain's mess, where the table doubled as an operating theater during emergencies.

Ship's quarters were tight on the 300-foot-long, 32-foot-wide vessel. Almost every inch is given over to the machinery needed to power, cool, and navigate the sub -- and house an 82-man crew. Then there was the matter of cargo: 18 torpedoes, four nuclear - tipped cruise missiles, and enough food and fresh water to last up to 90 days at sea. The ship is also packed with myriad gauges, valves, and controls, all labeled in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet.

A tour of the sub confirms that life on board was not easy, particularly for the enlisted men. The junior crew slept in shifts and ate on their bunks, which are wedged next to torpedo tubes, missile guidance antennae, and wherever else they would fit. If sleeping accommodations were spartan, the facilities for personal hygiene were worse. Crew members were allowed one shower per week: one minute of salt water to lather up, and one minute of fresh water to rinse off. As for laundry, sea water had to suffice. And there were only two toilets -- a third was converted to an arms locker holding pistols and AK-47s used to guard the ship when it docked.

The diesel-powered Juliett 484, also known by its Soviet designation, K-77, was deployed from the mid - 1960s until 1994. It was one of 16 such subs in the fleet. After it was decommissioned, and prior to its current incarnation as a museum, the Juliett 484 served as a restaurant and cocktail lounge in Helsinki, had an unsuccessful tenure as a tourist attraction in St. Petersburg, Fla., and was offered for sale on eBay for \$1 million. It didn't sell. It was also used in the making of the 2002 Harrison Ford- Liam Neeson thriller, "K-19 The Widowmaker." Afterward, the USS Saratoga Museum Foundation purchased the sub, restored it, and towed it from Halifax, Nova Scotia (where the movie was shot), to its current location on Narragansett Bay. It is one of only two remaining cruise missile subs in the world; the other is on display in Germany.

When it was launched in 1965, the Juliett 484's rubber-sheathed hull and quiet diesel electric power system made it difficult for US and NATO forces to detect the sub. Its nuclear-armed cruise missiles, which were more powerful than the atom bombs dropped on Japan, had a range of 300 miles and were designed to be able to hit centers including Boston, New York, and Washington.

Fortunately, things never got to that point. The Soviets never did fire one. The US Navy figured out how to detect the Juliett 484 class of subs, rendering them ineffective as attack vessels. Moreover, the Juliett needed to surface in order to fire a missile, a process that took up to 14 minutes, probably time enough for US or NATO forces to destroy the ship.

Juliect-class subs were withdrawn from active service in the late 1980s, and by 1994 all had been decommissioned. A visit aboard the Juliett 484 is a reminder of a not-so-distant time, and of the many comforts of home.

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Unfortunately, the Russian Sub Museum is gone -- it sank during an April 2007 storm. It was subsequently recovered from the depths of Narragansett Bay; however, it sustained major damage and is no longer open to the public.