

Festival brings awareness to preservation of Battleship Texas

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Denny Hair brought General Patton to life to the delight of historians young and old.



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By Y.C. OROZCO

The battleship USS Texas celebrated 100 years last week in a celebration that culminated with Saturday's festival.

Touring the grounds at the San Jacinto Battleground Historic Site, visitors could take a walking tour of the Texas and learn about not only its history, but its future as a state treasure.

"Everybody has memories of being on this battleship, and when you think about all the history - she was fastest, most powerful and feared ship in the world," said Houston fireman Shawn Gourley, who exercises his own love of history as a re-enactor with the 6th Cavalry Historical Association. Gourley was on hand Saturday commanding several re-enactments of World War II battles.

The festival's goal was not only celebrating that history, but to raise funds to keep it as a museum and from deterioration.

"We're just trying to raise awareness to the plight of the battleship Texas," Gourley said. "She's in horrible shape, and she's in fear of collapse at any time. We feel she's just as important to the state of Texas as the Alamo."

It was also a display for students of American wars.

Re-enactors staging seminal World War II battles, guests walking around in full regalia, down to the historically-accurate buttons - it was a day to remember service: from the Civil War to Afghanistan as re-enactors brought history alive to guests.

Directing commands and walking through the grounds in character and with authority, festival visitors gravitated to the recognizable mannerisms and uniform - General George S. Patton was brought to life by Denny Hair, a self-described history buff.

"I play Patton all over the country," he said.

Hair's Patton is more a tribute to the real Patton, than the George C. Scott version.

"People identify with the Patton figure because they've seen the movie so much," he said. "He was much different than the movie."

But even in that iconic Hollywood portrayal, Patton's strength as a leader shows through, and it's something that people seem to revere, Hair said.

About 20 years ago, Hair began portraying Patton at festivals all over the U.S. and his presence at Saturday festival was in keeping with his adherence to historical accuracy, since General Patton crossed paths with the Texas twice, he said.

Hair was a Houston police officer for 30 years, then ran the Houston police museum and is a past chairman of the Battleship Texas. History is his passion.

It was under his board in the 1980s that money was raised to dry dock the Texas for the first time since World War II, becoming the first U.S. battleship to become a permanent museum vessel.

The battleship is an iconic symbol to the state, he said. Keeping it where it is, in Texas and intact, is the mission.

"When you grow up in Texas, you have a certain Texas pride," he said. "Texas isn't just a state - it's a state of mind. We love being Texan and this is our ship and we want to support it."

For information on the USS Texas and the Battleship Texas Foundation, visit www.battleshiptexas.org