

April 24



The Submarine Capital of the World

All the way back in October of 2022 I wrote a short article on David Bushnell’s “Turtle” as part of my *Connecticut Industry During Times of War* series, which discusses Connecticut’s industrial prowess and ingenuity from the Revolutionary War to the Second World War. The Turtle was the first submarine to be used in combat. The submersible was launched multiple times in 1776 against the British fleet and was eventually sunk without meeting its intended potential. As a fitting end to our chronological series, I thought I would discuss how far the State had come to now be home to a town called “The Submarine Capital of the World.”

Groton is the town that earned this moniker for its long history in submarine construction and as the location for one of the largest submarine bases in the world: Naval Submarine Base New London. The story of this naval base started over 150 years ago. A few years after the American Civil War had come to an end, the Navy was given access to 112 acres of land in Groton, along the Thames River, to build a new naval station. Ground was broken in 1872 with the construction of a pier and two buildings - a coaling station for refueling ships would be built in 1898 (Military Installations). For the most part, the New London Naval Station was considered rather unimportant and it stagnated throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. It served primarily as a storage depot for inactive ships. Discussion over shutting down the underutilized base was a common topic. In 1876, Connecticut Congressman John Wait argued successfully against closure of the base (*The Willimantic Journal*, 1876). Again in 1882, when he proposed a bill to improve the naval station, a Mr. Bromley rebuked, “there is about as much chance for establishing a navy yard on the Thames as there is for establishing peach orchards in Labrador.” (*The Willimantic Journal*, 1882). The following year, a Navy commission found that the naval station in Groton was unsuitable as a site for a naval yard and would be of better use as a naval asylum (*The Day*, 1883). In 1884, the discussion reached Connecticut newspapers once more over the possible



USS Barb crew members pose with their submarine’s battle flag at the conclusion of her 12th war patrol (August 1945). Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

abandonment of the facility (*The Press, 1884*). Clearly, these handful of early examples show that the Groton naval base barely skirted being decommissioned for the first thirty years of its existence. Its saving grace would come in 1915, when President Wilson's Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, inspected the area and publicly announced that the underused naval station will be the Navy's first submarine base (Walker). By the end of 1915, at least seven submarines along with supporting vessels had arrived in Groton.

Rapid expansion immediately followed the naval yard's new designation as a permanent submarine base. At the conclusion of World War One in 1918, the New London Submarine Base hosted 81 buildings, 20 submarines, and 1,400 personnel. The base saw continued enhancement even through the Great Depression of the 1930s. More than 26 warehouses, barracks, and workshops were built at the base under Federal Government employment programs (Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic). The quick turnaround from a nearly vacant naval station into the first naval yard of its kind in the United States was primarily due to the shock and success of unrestricted submarine warfare conducted by Germany during the First World War. Another convenient influence to this decision was that the New London Ship & Engine Company was located in Groton. The New London Ship & Engine Company had been incorporated as a subsidiary of Electric Boat Company just a few years prior to manufacture diesel engines for surface vessels and submarines. It would eventually merge with Electric Boat and act as its main shipyard (Stansbury).



Man working on hull of U.S. submarine at Electric Boat Co., Groton, Conn. (August 1943). Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.



Aerial view of the U.S. Naval Submarine Base New London in Groton, Conn. (July 1941). Source: Naval History and Heritage Command Public Domain.

By the Second World War (1939-1945), Connecticut's submarine base was fully outfitted and Electric Boat had held its position as the largest supplier of submarines to the U.S. Navy. These submarines would play a major role in the conflict. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, mass production of wartime material began - including substantial orders for

submarines. Over the course of the war, Electric Boat in Groton would produce an impressive 74 submarines for the war effort (Electric Boat History). To accommodate this scale of production, the workforce of the Groton shipyard would increase fivefold, totaling around 12,500 workers. The purchase of nearby property, mostly the former Groton Iron Works, allowed Electric Boat to create the Victory Yard in 1942 which added greater capacity for submarine production. Submarine Base New London would also experience another period of vast expansion, growing from 112 acres to just under 500 acres before the war's end and adding thousands to its workforce to tend the growing fleet stationed there (Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic).

The United States made strikingly effective use of its submarines in the Second World War. Submarines alone are attributed to sinking 30% of the Japanese Navy in addition to roughly 63% of Japanese shipping (Davis). Connecticut's own submarines played key roles and are lauded as some of the most successful of the war. Among them are USS *Flasher* and USS *Barb*, which are both listed as among the top five most effective United States submarines when ranked by the amount of tonnage they sunk. USS *Flasher* launched from Groton in June of 1943 and sank a total of 100,231 tons of shipping in the Pacific Theater. USS *Barb* launched in April of 1942 with a service record of sinking a total of 96,628 tons, including the sinking of an aircraft carrier. Both of these submarines were awarded Presidential Unit Citations for their outstanding records. Another standout example is the USS *Tautog*, which launched from Groton in January of 1940. *Tautog* is credited with sinking 26 ships during World War Two, the second most out of all U.S. Submarines. All three would survive the war (Naval History and Heritage Command).



USS *Tautog* launching at the Electric Boat Co. Shipyard, Groton, CT. (January 1940). Source: Naval Historical Center collections.

Today, Electric Boat is a subsidiary of General Dynamics Corporation, which formed from Electric Boat in the years following World War Two when the company was looking to diversify. Naval Submarine Base New London now bears another title, "Home of the Submarine Force." Almost all submariners will pass through the naval base for training. From the humble beginnings of Bushnell's Turtle, to the nuclear submarines of the 1950s and beyond, Connecticut's shoreline has been at the forefront of innovation and production. As the *Connecticut Industry During Times of War* series has shown, this State has certainly proved itself worthy of USS *Connecticut*'s motto: "Arsenal of the Nation."



Seawolf-class fast-attack submarine USS Connecticut surfaces in the Arctic Circle during Ice Exercise 2020. Beaufort Sea, Arctic Circle (May 2020). Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

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