



Contributed photos

Above left, the interior of the Iwo Jima/World War II museum, which will be making a stop on the Branford Green on May 27. Above right, the exterior of the mobile museum.

History on the move with mobile museum

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Iwo Jima/World War II museum to make stop in Branford

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — According to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs statistics, we are losing 372 World War II veterans per day. Only 620,000 of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II were alive in 2016.

East Hartford's Gary Roy and his wife Marianne Mihalyo saw those statistics and decided to do something about it — specifically, with an Iwo Jima/World War II traveling museum designed to

honor American soldiers who fought in the World War II era.

Throughout Monday, May 27, the 20-foot trailer housing the museum, parked on the Branford Green, will seek to animate a part of history that is gradually fading into oblivion.

With carefully curated displays of World War II medical supplies, sand from Normandy and Iwo Jima, and old photos, as well as uniforms belonging to Marines and female Coast Guard members, "it's our way to ensure the service and sacrifice of these brave men and woman aren't forgotten," said Roy, who, with his wife, volunteers at the Iwo Jima memorial on the New Britain and Newington border.

There, the two met both Iwo Jima survivors and World War II veterans. They heard their stories. They

saw, to his dismay, how their numbers were gradually dwindling.

The couple had spent years collecting memorabilia from estate sales, flea markets, and church bazaars. Then came the question of how to present what they'd collected to the public. A stationary building wasn't realistic.

"It would be too much overhead and too dependent on people taking the time to come to us," he said.

Finally, they came up with the idea of a trailer. "We could convert it into a museum and bring the history to them."

They built shelves to display their collection, fitted the exhibits with lighting and the trailer with wheelchair-accessible ramps. They painted the exterior with the same gray as the amphibious "Higgins boats" used during World

War II to land on beaches. Though both work full-time jobs, they routinely work late into the night, refining the displays.

"It's a labor of love," Roy said.

Since 2017, the museum has made stops at schools, historical societies, senior centers, VFW branches and American Legion halls, and town events.

"It's so wonderful to see people go through and hear them say 'look at that uniform,' or 'I didn't know women were involved in World War II,'" he said. "That's another reason we built it, so people will learn there's so much more about that time than what they've seen in movies and on television."

The same is true for the inclusion of Iwo Jima, the 36-day battle fought out on an 8-square-mile sulfur-reeking island which

constituted among the most ferocious fighting of World War II and resulted in more than 26,000 American casualties, including 6,821 dead.

"We try to educate people on Iwo Jima," he said. "The Japanese got us into the war and 1945 was the first time we raised our flag on Japanese soil."

Count Iwo Jima survivor Vinnie Thomas of Branford a fan. "The museum is just wonderful," he said. "And important. So that our young people can learn what we endured at a time when our country was at great risk. So it's not forgotten."

For information on the Iwo Jima/World War II traveling museum, call 860-291-9666 or visit iwojima/worldwarii museum on Facebook.