

HIGH AND DRY SUBMARINE VENUE

A recurring mystery has unfolded in our years since first moving to North Carolina in 1968 – we must leave our personal yard of fallen leaves in search of corporate leaves yet to fall. At least one North Carolina venue remained where we had not searched for the perfect fall foliage photo-op – Burnsville.

The foliage has never disappointed my wife. If the leaves aren't at their peak on our Wednesday, she extolls the luck of those coming up on Thursday. If past their peak, she is happy for those who came up on Tuesday. For most years, she has gone down the mountain exclaiming, "Those were the most beautiful leaves we have ever seen!"

Going up the mountains exclusively for leaves has always seemed a slippery slope for me. On this Burnsville trip, while diligently watching for leaves, we would scope out the North Carolina Submarine Memorial – just because we happened to be in the area.

Why are you surprised that the Submarine Memorial is in Burnsville? Why not, the town of Burnsville is named after Navy Captain Otway Burns, Commander of the U.S. Privateer, Snap Dragon. Burns' Beaufort, NC based ship captured 42 British vessels during the War of 1812.

Perhaps you should be surprised about the Burnsville Submarine Memorial, since at least two prominent Burnsvillians, both lifetime residents, did not know about the site. First responder at the Burnsville Chamber of Commerce took a pass on the Memorial as well, but the query was handed off to another representative, who by the authoritative sound of his voice alone, left no doubt he was born to work for the Chamber.

"Go out of town just a little piece, hang a right and keep going up. When you come to a sign, 'Moonshine Mountain', turn left and keep going up." Years of intuition kept telling me we would come to a 'Dead End' sign long before 'Moonshine Mountain'. Even turned off and stuffed into the glove compartment, our GPS kept moaning, "Turn around as soon as possible!"

More than once, I had the feeling they were getting a large charge out of us, back down in the Burnsville C of C offices, guessing whether the road or our nerve would run out first.

As long as there were leaves to see, my wife was with me, so we kept ascending Moonshine Mountain. I wondered to myself if our mountains knew about tree lines. At the precise point where the NCDOT disclaims any modicum of maintenance, there she blew – The North Carolina Submarine Memorial, in all its glory!

Without reservation, it is the best kept secret in Burnsville. As for those two Burnsville natives first asked – they know now, we took them up there!

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I look forward to learning more about this Memorial and about the submariners who maintain this tribute to their fallen shipmates. So far, I've learned the Memorial was built by a World War II Chief Petty Officer, who owned the land atop Moonshine Mountain.

Both the Chief and his wife have passed on and the property has changed hands. The current owner has allowed the Submariners unfettered access to the Memorial. Negotiations for a permanent easement are underway.

Each May, the Submariners gather on Moonshine Mountain for Memorial services. There is a 'Tolling of the boats' for the 52 submarines lost during World War II. Too bad I had to be reminded by Chuck Jensen, a submariner who lives in Forest Oaks, but we have lost four submarines since World War II. Two of which were nuclear boats.

As part of a teachable moment, Jensen informed me there were two types of ships, targets and submarines. Furthermore, he said any ship could do what submarines do, but only once.

I should not have attempted to reciprocate with teachable moments by questioning Jensen why submarines were called boats, inasmuch as the Navy considers all vessels as ships. Patiently, he explained, "Early submarines were called boats because they were launched from other ships."

Submarines are long past the need for launching assistance, but submariners still choose to refer to their vessels as boats – to them, it is all the difference in the world.

Visiting the North Carolina Submarine Memorial in Burnsville is somewhat of an enigma. There are no billboards, no signs, no brochures, and we found few 'locals' who were aware of the Memorial. The nearest submarine-navigable water may be the Atlantic Ocean.

Submariners have a motto, "Anytime, anywhere, always ready, always there." Without a doubt, "Tolling of the boats" atop Moonshine Mountain on Memorial Day would be an unforgettable experience.

One of my best friends is a Naval Academy graduate and submarine officer. To Dave, and his fellow submariners, Thank you for your service!

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