A Disturbing Discovery at Bass Rocks
by Terry Weber Mangos
FOREWORD

This story is part of a collection of short stories we are calling “Moments”. The Moment Collection in the Gloucester400+ Stories Project represents a singular impactful memory from someone’s life related to Gloucester, MA. Enjoy the story and take your own moment to think about its meaning, not just for Billy Barron, but the community of Gloucester and Cape Ann.
A Disturbing Discovery at Bass Rocks

BY TERRY WEBER MANGOS

It wasn’t so long ago when many young kids could wander freely, exploring their neighborhoods and beyond, so long as they were home before the streetlights came on. Kids rode bikes for hours - miles away from home; explored the woods, abandoned buildings, and their neighbors’ backyards. Sometimes their parents had no idea what they were up to all day, and without cell phones, there was no way to find out.

Billy Henry Barron grew up having a measure of freedom to explore his surroundings. In 1958, he was eleven years old. Billy was from Worcester, MA, and summered in Gloucester just like his pal, Susie. One of their activities was to “jump the dunes” at Good Harbor Beach. Back then, the dunes were much higher.

“We didn’t know anything about beach erosion,” said Billy. “We could run and jump 14 feet off the dune and then roll when we hit the ground. It was a blast!”

Billy recalled spending all sunny days outside, after all, there was no TV in their summer home, and of course, no internet or cell phones! On this day, Susie and Billy spent the morning dune jumping. Then they decided to walk the beach from one end to the other. Barefoot and in bathing suits, they wandered through the tall beach grasses, played in the waves, and climbed and explored the nearby rocks. Rock climbing and searching for caves were normal activities for Billy and Susie.

“We knew about a certain small cave. It was not easy to access,” said Billy. “We decided to enter the dark tunnel leading to the cave. You could not stand straight up in the tunnel; it in-
volved crouching and crawling. When you got down to the cave, you could see water splashing up through the lower rocks."

A particularly low tide made the bottom of the cave more visible, and the rays of sunlight piercing the cave’s crevices offered dim lighting. “That’s when Susie and I spotted a rusted grey metal box on a ledge. Naturally, we were curious but also a little scared as sometimes a wave would start filling the cave. But Susie was very clever, she was able to calculate how long we had between waves to grab the box.”

Billy and Susie also had to count on a bit of luck to reach the box without getting stuck in rising water or encountering any other surprises the lonely cave might hold. The heavy box was about two feet long and one foot high. They both pushed the box as they slowly exited the cave. Getting the box out was made trickier by having to walk/crawl on wet and jagged rocks with nothing to protect their feet and skin.

Upon closer examination in the sun, Billy noticed no lock on the box, and the latch was rusted shut.

“It looked different, foreboding. It did not look right,” said Billy. “But we were determined to open it, so I ran home and got my screwdriver.”

Upon his return, Billy jammed the screwdriver between the latch and the box, and with some pulling and twisting, finally pried it open. To Billy and Susie’s surprise, inside the box were Lugers (German pistols), hand grenades, flares, ammunition, and the remnants of what looked like maps. “I thought they were German weapons the moment I opened the trunk,” said Billy. “But, I believe it was my father’s conversation with the police that confirmed the weapons were German in origin. There were some identifying German markers that only adults would know about. In any case, Susie and I knew this was a serious thing.”
Billy recalled that the weapons were wet and rusty. He could not decipher the remnants of maps that were wrapped in protective material. “I remember seeing a series of X’s marking certain spots,” said Billy, “but I could not decipher any words. They were probably German.”

Billy ran to find his father, who was nearby on the beach. After one look at the weapons, Billy’s dad returned to their summer home to call the police. Billy and Susie stayed behind, guarding the box. “I don’t remember being scared,” said Billy. “I felt more excited, almost like a hero, when you find something from the ‘bad guys’ and you give it to the police.”

But Billy’s childish excitement was tempered by a lack of information from the police. His family never heard anything more about the discovery or what became of the box. And as Billy grew older, he realized that this discovery had more meaning than he could fully understand as a child.

“In my reading about this topic, I learned that German U-boats were quite common in the waters off New England during World War II,” said Billy. “There was speculation that Germans were planning land attacks up and down the coast.”

Billy also speculated that the box had to be placed in the cave and that it did not fall off a boat or get washed into the cave. “If I remember correctly,” he said, “the small openings in the lower part of the cave could not have a large box pass through them. It was also very heavy.”

The unanswered questions of his discovery remain in Billy’s mind. Who put the box there? Why? Was the box connected to WWII? Were Germans physically on the shores of Good Harbor or Bass Rocks? Was the box left there for German sympathizers? Could the box represent a small part of a planned invasion by the Germans?

“As an adult I realized this box was likely connected to some very dark and frightening days for our country,” said Billy. “Still, discovering and opening that box was one of the most exciting moments of my childhood.”
AFTERWORD

Billy Barron now lives in Gloucester year-round with his wife Liz. They still “summer” with many of the same friends from years ago.

EDITOR’S NOTE

The year of discovery of the box (1958) is approximate but Billy was about ten or eleven years old. I reached out to the Gloucester Police Department for records, but according to them, records from this time were no longer on file.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Weber Mangos is a writer from Gloucester, MA. She is also the Stories Project Manager for the Gloucester400+. Terry has been published in the Boston Globe, Providence Journal, the Gloucester Daily Times and numerous other publications. She enjoys meeting new writers and helping them tell their story.

LINKS FOR FURTHER READING

See below for links to further reading about German U-boats (submarines) off the coast of New England during WWII. Amongst other activities, Germans were actively attempting to cut off and disrupt shipping routes, sometimes sinking American boats. In some cases, Germans were known or suspected to come ashore.

https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Atlantic
http://www.wreckhunter.net/u-boats.htm