

The Virginian-Pilot

Paranormal activity aboard the Wisconsin

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if you go

What "Haunted Ship: BB64 Three Decks of Darkness"

When 6:30 to 10:30 tonight and Friday, 6:30 to 11 p.m. Saturday. A tour group leaves about every 15 minutes.

Where Nauticus, 1 Waterside Drive, Norfolk

Cost \$15, \$10 for Nauticus members

More info 664-1000, www.nauticus.org

By Nicole Alvarado
The Virginian-Pilot

This isn't your typical haunted house. For one, it's not a house. It's a really big boat. Specifically, the battleship Wisconsin, moored next to Nauticus in downtown Norfolk.

It's also not full of the usual residents of today's haunted house neighborhood. There are no mummies or vampires, no severed hands or bloodied extras. In fact, there is no gore at all.

There are, however, ghosts. And a creepy backstory.

It's 1946, the war is over, America is in a state of exultant celebration as servicemen make their way back to their families. The crew of the Wisconsin is among them as the battleship has just

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returned to Norfolk after a tumultuous worldwide tour.

This is all true. But what comes next is where the fiction takes over for Nauticus' "Haunted Ship."

Among the post-war revelers is James Spruill, a young crew member aboard the Wisconsin, who is overjoyed to be reunited with his wife, Laura, and their 5-year-old son, Ethan.

Amid the hustle and bustle of his dock duties, he becomes separated from his family. He searches the ship but finds no sign of them. Day fades into night, and his family is still nowhere to be found.

They are never found.

James dies a broken man, his last message to the world cryptically etched into a wall: "They're still on board."

"The story is very paranormal, intense ... it's very cerebral," said Stephen Kirkland, acting executive director at Nauticus and the mastermind behind the frightening tour. "I tried to make (this year's script) not so overt."

This October marks Nauticus' third annual tour below decks of the battleship Wisconsin, and this year things were taken up a notch. The museum unveiled a new tour route, tak-

ing guests through parts of the ship — including the third deck — that have never been a part of previous tours. And for the first time, the "Haunted Ship" story features a female lead, a previous thematic roadblock because the Wisconsin was manned by an all-male staff.

The 45-minute tour begins with a short video, a purported home movie made by a couple who visited the ship a month ago. It shows a young woman teasing her paranoid husband as a dark figure of a woman dressed in old-fashioned attire flits on- and off-screen.

You are then led through the ship's bowels to find out: What ever happened to Laura and Ethan Spruill?

"It was fun, entertaining, overall enjoyable," said David Woods, of Chesapeake, a first-timer to the ship's Halloween event. "The ship itself has an eeriness; it's very dark."

Kirkland utilizes the strategies of "less is more" and tactical misdirection to dramatic effect. The interior of the ship is creepy enough to send shivers down your spine without any extra effort. Isolated from the outside world — without even the sound of a gust of wind to remind you of life topside — the darkness is oppressive and the silence amplifies every sense until you can

feel all the hairs on your body standing at attention.

"Sometimes, the scariest spaces are where we don't have things happen, just because they're dark voids and you're wondering what's going to jump out," Kirkland said.

Be wary as you make your way through the belly of the iron beast. The haunted route is barely illuminated by the dimly pulsing flow of red lights that actually were employed during times of war — when they're lit at all.

The ladders and hatches are tricky enough to navigate without the shakiness of fear tingeing the periphery of your senses, which is a big part of the reason why the tour is recommended for ages 12 and over.

"Last year, we had a soccer team of some young teenage girls; they were about 13 years old," Kirkland said. "Before the tour was even over, we had to escort them off the ship, and they were all crying out of fear."

This year, Kirkland said the ship's haunted exhibit could be even more intense.

"There is no question about it — it is scarier than it's ever been."

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JON ABRAHAMS

Martha Walker, Nauticus' curator, portrays the ghost of Laura Spruill, a sailor's wife who purportedly was lost onboard the battleship Wisconsin.