

Burglars swipe USS Juneau memorial items from local veterans organization

February 5, 2020 by Matt Miller, KTOO



USS Juneau memorial, including bead strands made by Donna Hurley, as it looked in the American Legion Auke Bay Post 25 before the burglary in January. (Photo courtesy of Donna Hurley)

Juneau police are investigating a burglary at the American Legion post in Auke Bay.

Some of the stolen items may have had low monetary value, but the crime's victims say they had priceless sentimental value.

American Legion Auke Bay Post 25 Commander John Cooper said burglars broke into the building sometime around Jan. 21 and took two Toyo heaters, a flat-screen TV, and some frozen food from the kitchen.

Cooper said they also took part of a display commemorating those who died during the sinking of the USS Juneau in the Pacific Ocean during World War II.

“They’re white beads,” said Cooper. “They’re not pearls. They’re not high-value, except for their symbolic value. Somebody saw them, I think, somebody thought they were probably little pearls and thought they’d get rich.”

The beads were made by local artist Donna Hurley, who wanted to go beyond just the numbers of people who died. So she made the bead strings to tell the story of the USS Juneau’s crew members and how they died.

“A little different when you see like that, isn’t it?” asked Hurley when she showed a new, identical set of beads that she has almost finished.



Juneau artist Donna Hurley shows a new set of bead strands that she has almost completed to replace those stolen from the American Legion Auke Bay Post 25's USS Juneau memorial in January. The green, silver and light blue three-bead string with the angel wing, seen in the center, commemorates all three U.S. Navy ships that were named USS Juneau. A previous version of the ship's bead strand was displayed inside a watch dome at the American Legion's display. (Photo by Matt Miller/KTOO)

From the display stolen from the American Legion, there are three strands. The longest has 697 beads — one bead for each crew member before the ship sank in the [Naval Battle of Guadalcanal](#).

The next strand is smaller, and it only has 140 beads. Those represent the sailors who were blown off the ship or managed to escape when it was hit by a torpedo and sank.

The final strand is much, much smaller. It includes just 10 beads. Those are for the only sailors who survived exposure and shark attacks in the South Pacific for eight days before they were finally rescued.

“It’s important we don’t forget,” Hurley said.

“This is one of the largest naval disasters in our history,” she said. “Five (Sullivan) brothers died, an entire crew, and a ship that was nine months old.”

Hurley said she’s made a few versions of the project over the years. The beads taken from the American Legion were made in conjunction with a recent return of the USS Juneau’s silver set to Juneau.

When the ship was being built during World War II, Hurley said Juneau school kids helped raise money for a silver punch bowl, tray, cups and candlesticks. The silver set was presented to the crew when the ship was commissioned in 1942, but it was placed in storage just before it entered combat.

Ina Lucas, wife of Juneau’s mayor at the time, was the ship’s sponsor. Hurley said Lucas christened the USS Juneau and met many of the crew before the ship went into battle.

Hurley said the same silver set was also used aboard two subsequent vessels named Juneau.

There are other memorials to the original USS Juneau. Down on the waterfront where cruise ship passengers disembark every summer, there’s a monument that lists all of the names of the people who died.

Hurley said most of the items stolen from the American Legion can be replaced.

“But, like one of the (Facebook) posts said, it’s like robbing a church,” Hurley said. “These guys are veterans. They fought for us. I mean, we lived the life we live because of them. And those (beads) had no meaning to the people that stole it. They only had meaning to the vets. And that breaks my heart.”

No one has been arrested and none of the stolen items have been recovered. The Juneau Police Department said they have video of the theft, and they’re still investigating the case.

When the theft was originally reported on social media, there was a lot of speculation about who could be responsible.

But Lt. Krag Campbell cautions against putting out information on Facebook about potential suspects.

“Social media spreads to a lot of people,” Campbell said. “And typically, once a suspect knows that, ‘Hey, the police are going to be looking for my vehicle with a very specific tire,’ or something like that, (then) they might try to hide or alter that unique identifier.”

And, Campbell said, sometimes information put out on social media may just be wrong.



A short bead strand created by Donna Hurley to commemorate the survivors of the USS Juneau sinking during World War II. The white beads are for the 10 sailors who survived the sinking and then eight days at sea before they were rescued. The darker beads are for other crew members who left the ship for various reasons shortly before the final battle and the ship's sinking. Portions of the longest strand commemorating all 697 crew members can be seen stretched out in the background. (Photo by Matt Miller/KTOO)



Juneau Mayor Ken Koelsch speaks during a memorial service for the USS Juneau on the downtown waterfront on May 16, 2017. (Photo by Matt Miller/KTOO)