

'It's a passion for me'

STC man turns pleasure into business with military items

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For Steve Thompson, the military memorabilia he's accumulated over the past 50 years is more than just a collection.

"This is history," said Thompson, as his eyes moved from a hand-painted suitcase to a World War II flight jacket.

The longtime St. Charles resident began collecting military memorabilia when he was 12 years old and recently turned that passion into a business.

Thompson's collection, "Dixie Devil Diver," was put on display at the Antique Market I in downtown St. Charles earlier this month.

And by mid-July, the retired businessman said, items from his collection will be for sale, ranging from a few dollars for a poster to a couple thousand dollars for a leather jacket.

"This isn't a means to make money," Thompson said, explaining that several valuable items are kept at a separate storage facility and won't be sold.

Remembering what life was like when the troops returned home after World War II, Thompson said it was such a "terrific period of time for the country," that he wanted to pay homage to the country's veterans.

See **PASSION**, page 5A



THE COLLECTION

For information on Steve Thompson's collection "Dixie Devil Diver," visit Antique Market I at 11 North Third Street in St. Charles or visit www.dixiedevildiver.com.

LEFT: A flight jacket with hand-drawn artwork is in Steve Thompson's military memorabilia collection. **BELOW:** A set of flight goggles in Thompson's collection.



Thompson has made many trips to Pacific to visit World War II sites

• PASSION

Continued from page 1A

"It was the best 20 years of American history because of all the patriotism and hard work," Thompson said. "When they came back, they were determined to take advantage of the freedom they fought for."

And "Dixie Devil Divers" is a start to paying respect, Thompson said, adding that one day he'd like to see his collection in a museum.

The name, "Dixie Devil Divers," was derived from an old military tradition, Thompson said.

"Fighter pilots used to paint the name of their sweetheart on their plane," he said. "My wife's name is Dixie and if I were a fighter pilot, this is what I would have done."

Over the years, Thompson, who trained as a combat medic in the 1960s, has made many trips to the Pacific, visiting World War battle sites.

He's stood on the same runway that the Enola Gay bomber plane took off to drop the atomic bomb and has walked the Bataan Death March in the Philippines.

"The best part is meeting the vets," Thompson said.

One day, he would like to compile all the veterans' stories into a book. But in the meantime, Thompson said he'll continue to buy and sell military memorabilia.



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One of the jackets in Steve Thompson's military memorabilia collection includes original artwork.

"It's a passion for me," he said. "I want to pass along that patriotism and if I can accomplish that, I'll be a happy guy."