

Their Stories Are Not Silent

A visit to the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum & Educational Center

by Jill Ocone

Picture a football field filled with 1,562 males and one female. Now imagine every single one of those people disappears in the blink of an eye. The field is left empty with only a story to be told for each of those souls.

How did this vision make you feel?

This was not just a vision but reality right here in New Jersey two generations ago when a total of 1,563 residents from the Garden State lost their lives in Vietnam. Fifty or more years later, how can we learn about an era that now seems so long ago? And how can we learn their stories and keep their legacies alive, while preserving the history of a generation?

The answers are all right in Monmouth County, and millions of people each year either drive right past them or are within one thousand feet and never even realize it.

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Top Right: A restored 1964 Bell UH-1D Huey helicopter outside the Museum & Educational Center.

Bottom Right: The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.



courtesy of New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation





The memorial, designed by Hien Nguyen, a refugee who left South Vietnam in 1975, is a two hundred foot, open-air circular pavilion consisting of 366 eight-foot-tall black granite panels, one for each day of the year with 1,563 names inscribed.

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the Vietnam Era Museum & Educational Center are located next to PNC Arts Center in Holmdel, right off Garden State Parkway Exit 116. Both are operated by the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation (NJVVMF), a non-profit organization that does not receive any funding from the State of New Jersey for their operations.

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation's mission is to offer a meaningful and engaging experience that recognizes the sacrifices, courage, and valor of Vietnam veterans while encouraging and fostering a thorough understanding of the Vietnam Era, including the political, historical, social, cultural, and military aspects, which affected New Jersey and the United States.

NJVVMF Executive Director Bill Linderman, with both corporate and non-profit experience, came on board in 2009. "When I saw this place, I was just blown away by it. It's special. And I knew I wanted to be a part of it," he said. Linderman explained that coming to the Foundation made him more open about his own experiences in Vietnam. "I was in the Army in an ordinance outfit, and we offloaded and delivered ammunition and Agent Orange. I served, and it

had a real impact on my life, but I never really associated with other Vietnam veterans when I returned. I just went on with my life and never talked about it," he said.

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial

The Memorial not only memorializes and honors all of the New Jersey residents lost in Vietnam, but also gives visitors a visual impact of that massive loss. Designed by Hien Nguyen, a refugee who left South Vietnam in 1975, its two hundred foot, open-air circular pavilion consists of 366 eight-foot-tall black granite panels, one for each day of the year (including February 29). Each panel is engraved with the names of the soldiers killed or reported missing on that date, and the May 7 panel, the day the war ended, points toward Vietnam. All 1,563 names are inscribed on the Memorial; thirty-six hail from Ocean County and ninety-eight from Monmouth County.

As visitors walk around the Memorial, the sky and clouds above are reflected onto the granite giving the illusion that each name is floating in the sky. Out of the 366 panels, only nine are blank, meaning that there was only nine calendar days when no New Jersey residents were

lost in the war.

The Memorial is open to visitors 24-hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year and is free to visit. On the first Saturday of each month, volunteer Vietnam veterans give guided tours. It's the stories shared by the volunteer guides that really make a lasting impact. Curator Sarah Taggart said, "The difference is, when you come here on a Saturday or with a group for a tour, you meet volunteers with a name and a face, and they tell you why this place matters to them. Everybody is touched in some form."

One volunteer veteran is Dan O'Leary, who served in Vietnam from 1965 to 1966 with the Military Assistance Command Vietnam. O'Leary was awarded the Vietnam Service Medal and the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal for his service. Another volunteer veteran is Vernon O'Meally, who served in southeast Asia from 1968 to 1970 with a tour in AC-130 Spectre Gunships. O'Meally was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Purple Heart, seven Air Medals, the New Jersey Distinguished Service Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, and the New Jersey Vietnam Service Medal.

Taggart explained that to her, it's almost magical when visitors, especially children and teenagers, listen to the stories told by volunteer veterans like O'Leary and O'Meally. She can see their faces change as they hear a first-hand account of what being in Vietnam was like, or what a veteran endured upon returning home, which is quite different from veterans returning home from wars and conflicts today. "They listen, and they get it, and the experience is so much more than what they read about in a classroom," she said.

The Vietnam Era Museum & Educational Center

The Museum & Educational Center is located just a few short steps away from the Memorial and provides political, cultural, and historical context for the Memorial. It was dedicated in 1998 and was the first museum of its kind in the United States. The Museum & Educational

Center combine history about the Vietnam War with history about the Vietnam Era, showing how both impacted and changed the culture, society, and people of New Jersey and the United States.

One common misconception about the Museum & Educational Center is that it focuses solely on the war. "We strive to tell a very well-rounded picture. We're about the *era*. When they hear about us, a lot of people either know we are a memorial but do not know about the Museum & Educational Center, or they think we are a museum just about the war, and it's not. There's so much more to it," Taggart said.

Within the museum, two historic timelines cover the walls. One depicts the activity in Vietnam, while the other shows events happening concurrently in the United States. The timeline serves as a representation of the political, military, social, and cultural elements in play during the

Vietnam era. Several touch screen computers along the timeline provide an interactive display where visitors can see personal photographs provided by Vietnam veterans and their families interspersed with historical events.

Also within the museum is the Circle of Letters, a display that circles the main exhibit area. Actual letters and other items collected from those who served and from their supporters at home are displayed chronologically, and visitors can fully read these very personal and first-hand accounts of life as told through the handwriting of soldiers and their loved ones. Reading the letters can be a very moving experience, leaving visitors feeling like they actually communicated with those who signed them.

The stories told in the Testimony Theater gives visitors the chance to hear firsthand experiences and memories from the real faces and voices who were there. There's the story told

by one of the thousands of mothers who lost her sons, then another by a wife left without her husband. Many soldiers share their stories of returning home amid acrimony instead of appreciation, and others who found acclimating to Vietnam extremely difficult. Each reflection provides a deeper understanding of what these veterans and those close to them endured on a daily basis during that time.

The NJVVMF's most important project is the Biography Project, which is actively collecting biographical information on the men and women who are listed on the Memorial. Photographs, stories, and tributes are requested so that the memories of those who gave their lives in Vietnam are preserved forever. With the goal to teach the next generations about the life and story of each person listed on the Memorial, Taggart said, "We're

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always looking for families or friends to come forward with more of a personal perspective of the person, or a photograph, because we want to tell the most complete story about them. It's harder to remember somebody when you don't know anything about them, and these soldiers deserve to have their stories preserved and told for generations." The NJVVMF's website has a list of more than two hundred veterans who are missing photographs and stories and is seeking people to contribute information to help preserve these legacies.

One of the cornerstones of the Museum & Educational Center is found outside, and you can't miss it: a restored 1964 Bell UH-1D Huey helicopter. With over nine million hours of flight time, the Huey became the symbol of the United States combat forces in Vietnam and has become an iconic image of the Vietnam Era. In 2013, a group of veteran volunteers, many of them helicopter pilots during the Vietnam era, began the Operation Huey Restoration Project. It was dedicated in May 2014. With their own Huey stories to share, their work now leaves a lasting impression on all visitors.

Four additional memorials are also located on the grounds of the Museum & Educational Center. **The Purple Heart Memorial**, dedicated in 2010, honors the recipients of the nation's oldest military decoration. **The U.S. War Dog Memorial** was dedicated on 2006 and honors our nation's war dogs and their handlers—past, present, and future. For this memorial, sculptor Bruce Lindsay created a bronze statue of a kneeling soldier and his dog set on a granite base. **The Women Veterans Meditation Garden** was dedicated in 2001 as a tribute to the civilian and military women who served during the Vietnam Era through today. The Garden honors Captain Eleanor Alexander, who is the only woman honored on the memorial. The newest memorial is the **New Jersey Gold Star Family Monument**, which was dedicated in

September 2015. Designed by Hanlon Sculpture Studios, the monument includes three statues of family members along a center monument.

The NJVVMF is in the early stages of upgrading the Museum & Educational Center by adding an annex onto the building, as they have outgrown their current space. Taggart said, "We don't have enough room for our collection storage. This generation is starting to get where they are passing on or downsizing, and their stuff needs a place to live. The annex is going to be crucial for programming and collection storage space so we can function more professionally."

Linderman added that, along with the annex, the NJVVMF is also looking to expand their outdoor display of military equipment as well. "We're working with the New Jersey Department of Military and Veteran Affairs to relocate some of their static pieces, like maybe an armored personnel carrier, to outside the Museum & Educational Center. Different equipment such as an M48 tank, or a 105 howitzer, can create a new display that is educational, interactive, and historical," he said.



The U.S. War Dog Memorial honors our nation's war dogs and their handlers.

Many people are under the false impression that the Memorial and Museum are New Jersey state entities that receive state funding. They are not. "We are 100% self-sustained,

and people don't realize that, which is partly why we strive so hard to remain relevant because we have to. We have to make sure the names on the wall don't get forgotten, and that the stories are told," Taggart said. Donations, no matter how large or how small, are always welcome.

A visit to the New Jersey Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and the Vietnam Era Museum & Educational Center, along with the other memorials on site, will have a lasting impact, as the stories told by the names, faces, and souls educate and inspire. ♦

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the Vietnam Era Museum & Educational Center are located at 1 Memorial Lane in Holmdel next to the PNC Bank Arts Center. For more information, call (732) 335-0033 or email: info@njvvmf.org; Or visit: www.njvvmf.org; Facebook: www.facebook.com/NJVVMF; Twitter: [@njvvmf](https://twitter.com/njvvmf).

The **Memorial** is open 24/7/365 and admission is free. Guided tours by Vietnam veterans are available by request on the first Saturday of each month at 11:00 AM and 1:00 PM. There are picnic tables on the grounds.

The **Museum & Educational Center** is open Tues. - Sat. 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM and by appointment. Admission: adults \$7.; seniors and students: \$5.; children under twelve, veterans, and active duty soldiers are admitted free. Group tours, school tours and programs, and educator workshops are available. A variety of merchandise is for sale in the gift shop located in the lobby area. The Center's multi-purpose room is used for lectures, teleconferencing, and presentations to visiting groups and schools. The room, as well as other areas of the museum and grounds, is available to rent for private, corporate, professional, and community events.

How You Can Help: The NJVVMF relies on the generosity of people like you to keep both the Memorial and Museum & Educational Center open to everyone who wants to visit—including thousands of school children who come each year. You can become a member of the NJVVMF or contribute a one-time donation on their website (www.njvvmf.org). Volunteers are also needed to help with the front desk and NJVVMF events. Please call or visit the website for more information.