

# Small museum memorializes U.S.'s 'forgotten warriors'

By CHRIS LADDISH

My headlights shone on the green street sign, and the words "A Road" were displayed. Below it, a small, unremarkable sign read "Museum of the Forgotten Warriors".

"Ah-ha," I thought to myself. "I'm finally here." I turned right off of North Beale Road less than five minutes from Beale Air Force Base and onto the rugged road. Small, cottage-like houses lined the left-hand side and the only lights emitted were from curtained windows.

I slowly drove down the road until I came to a generic white stand with an "Open" sign, not unlike those you see outside a burger stand. As I stopped the car and got out, my eyes focused on a square, windowless building with only a flying American flag to set it apart from a toolshed. I had taken only a few steps forward before a bear of a man exited from a nearby home with his hand extended towards me. He introduced himself as Dann Spear, curator and founder of the museum. He led me past the base of the flag pole to a commonplace door, which he quickly unlocked and opened before me.

It truly was a time warp. As I stepped inside, I was transported to a period of death and confusion. Back to when U.S. troops, many no older than myself, were sent to another country to fight for a cause they did not understand. Back to a time of war — the Vietnam War. Weapons, uniforms, pictures, land mines, flags, patches, scrapbooks and photographs in glass cases filled the two rooms completely.

I stumbled around in awe, my eyes roaming throughout the two rooms which made up the museum. I would focus on an object of great fascination for only an instant before moving on to another equally interesting item. Dann would notice what I was examining and then give me its history; he leapt from one fascinating story to another. However, before I was taken in by it all, I had to ask how the museum and its displays all began. His answer to my question began 17 years ago.

It was 1972, and Dann was a sophomore in high school. He had friends who were seniors, and he learned that many were being drafted and sent to Vietnam. He

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nam War. Dann was always interested in war memorabilia, but he never envisioned that it would turn into a museum. He attached the patches to cloth-covered boards to be displayed. He kept these and the letters in a spare room at his house which he showed to family and friends. Gradually, he seemed to collect more Vietnam-related items, and it was then that he first began to conjure up ideas of a small exhibition. It was his way of "doing my part" as he watched his friends leave for war.

Slowly, one piece at a time, he expanded his collection. As veterans heard of Dann and his store of memories, more and more items were sent to him until, like today, he receives shoeboxes filled with things. Any items that were not personally given to him, Dann obtained through flea markets and garage sales. When he realized he could fill a small building with displays, Dann, along with help from his good friends, Sid and Mary Lou Watson, laid the foundation, raised the walls, and put the roof on what was to become the museum. The building was finished in 1982, but it was not until 1985 that the whole exhibition was completed. Since then, he has added a second room, and even today he has plans for an additional third room.

Inside the building is an incredible assortment of displays. They include everything from his patches to fully and realistically outfitted manequins, and artwork done by soldiers. Much of Dann's collection was "in country made" — made in Vietnam and brought back to the States. Dann has painstakingly built all the displays himself. However, he refuses to accept any donations other than more war memorabilia. He also does not seek publicity, but rather he relies on word of mouth to reach the veterans the museum was created for.

embarking from a plane in Vietnam. The mysterious soldier told the raw newcomer that it was a good luck charm, and so the new soldier wore it throughout his stay in Vietnam. Once during his tour in Vietnam, his unit left without him. The transport he should have been on was destroyed when it struck a mine. He believes the ring saved his life.

Most of the visitors Dann receives through his doors are themselves veterans. He is in contact with many nationwide veteran clubs. A few local ones visit him regularly. Dann reminisced about one time that a veterans motorcycle club visited his museum. There were around thirty members, all decked out in imposing black leather riding gear. At the same time, there was a young boy there who was visiting with his parents. The boy was running around and continually yelling, obviously distracting the burly veterans. Finally, one of them clamped his gloved hand on the small boy's shoulder. Dann thought for sure that the unlucky kid was going to be harmed by the veteran, but, instead, to Dann's surprise the man kneeled down. He looked the kid in the eye and said, "Son, please be more quiet. To me, this place is like church."

The museum is much, much more than what it may first appear to most of us. To me, it is a place of realization as I look at pictures of young soldiers no older than myself. I pictured myself in the photographs, an entire ocean between me and my home, fighting a war that I just could not put my heart and mind into. To the vets, it is not a collection of things, but rather, a collection of people and their lives that will never be forgotten. And to Dann, it is his way of giving the vets the "welcome home that many never got." The Museum of the Forgotten Warriors is located at 5865 "A" Road, Marysville, CA 95901. It is open to the public every Thursday from 7 to 10 p.m. and on the first Saturday of each month from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dann Spear is the curator of the museum and can be reached at 742-3090.