



Photo courtesy NJVMM

Veterans in front of the Museum's Huey

A PLACE OF HONOR

New Jersey's Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Museum

BY PAT JULIAN VELLUCCI

After 58,000 dead and 300,000 wounded, Vietnam is a word charged with meaning and emotion; a trigger for the memory of parents and grandparents who lost a child, for spouses who lost a loved one, and for its survivors who lost their youth. For the country itself, it is an aberration to be overcome – the bitter distance between age and innocence.

Anyone who ventures to visit Holmdel, New Jersey's Vietnam Memorial and Museum will know they are in the right place. As you approach a completely restored HUEY Helicopter, the sound of its menacing blades roaring hovers over an original combat tank among the other dazzling monuments. And it is hard

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to believe they barely set the stage for the amazing collection of artifacts awaiting them inside.

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paid the ultimate price for their service and to educate students, teachers, historians, and the public about our involvement in Southeast Asia. Tours often leave visitors of all ages emotionally moved.

The walls, which abound a small theatre, are lined floor to ceiling in chronological order starting over a thousand years ago. Through the use of film, video, kiosks and award-winning photography, the multi-media learning center is a time machine that transports its viewers, beginning with a colorful mural of Cho Chin China (its name prior to Vietnam) to the war's end in 1975 as they unfolded "In Country" (Vietnam) and throughout the United States. Mongols, Chinese, Japanese and French invaders are depicted. They all came to conquer. And they all failed.

At the memorial, there are 1,565 names on the wall, 1564 men and one woman, Captain Eleanor Grace Alexander. Unlike institutions of its kind, the NJVMM puts faces behind the names on the wall and uncovers the stories of those who lived through the conflict at home, arguably the most ambivalent time of the 20th century.

Fascinating histories accompany the memorabilia as told by the tour guides, all of whom are Vietnam Veterans. Its Chopper, for example, was discovered rotting away in a hanger at Maguire Airfield. Over the next months, the veterans themselves refurbished it. Upon com-



Amy Osborn emceeding the NJ Vietnam Veterans Remembrance Day Ceremony

pletion, the huge aircraft was gently towed, escorted by State Troopers and veterans of three wars – including a wheelchair-bound WWII Veteran – to its resting place outside the Museum. At its dedication in 2014, included in the crowd of over a thousand, was NFL great and Bronze Star recipient, Rocky Bleier, who introduced the original crew of highly decorated pilots and gunners who served on the Huey. At the posting of the colors, a squadron of combat helicopters flew overhead to pay their respects.

The concept of building a Memorial to New Jersey's fallen heroes from Vietnam became a piece of legislation written by former State Senator Edward T. O'Connor, Jr., the first Vietnam veteran elected to the NJ State legislature. In 1986, Governor Tom Kean signed that legislation, and the promise was made. All the political heavyweights supported the idea, through the Florio Administration and beyond, and a committee was formed to lead this charge; they found a location, put their expertise and passion into it and the project was on its way. In May of 1989 sixteen Vietnam Vets, called the Last Patrol, marched 237 miles from DC to its site with the rubbings of the NJ names killed in action. On 12 April 1995, the Memorial had its dedication. A crowd of over 15,000 joined General Norman Schwarzkopf to celebrate the event. The General took the occasion to say, "I'm most proud of being a Vietnam Veteran and the Memorial reminds me why."

On 17 September 1998, at the dedication of the Vietnam Era Museum, Governor Christie Whitman and her late husband John, a decorated Vietnam Veteran, introduced keynote speaker, former POW John McCain. The sena-



Amy Osborn with members of Rolling Thunder at an event in the museum.

tor delivered an emotionally charged speech sharing his experiences being shot down, and years of torture as a prisoner at the infamous Hanoi Hilton. The crowd of over 15,000 could not stop what is said to have been an eight-minute standing ovation.

Now in its 27th year, the NJVMM Board of directors led by Major General Clark Martin, a decorated fighter pilot with over one hundred missions flown over North Vietnam, decided the facility needed to be expanded. Retired state senator and Gold Star family member Nick Asselta joined the team, and his first promise was to bring the operation to its next level. The Senator's late brother, Charles "Chickie" Asselta, was a decorated veteran whose name is etched on the wall. Senator Asselta was emotionally involved. And his first move was to hire a new Executive Director.



Left to right: Lou Vlahakes Vietnam veteran, Amy Osborn, Leo Rosenzweig WWII vet, MG Clark Martin Vietnam veteran, Jade Glab Miss NJ 2020, David Drummond Vietnam veteran and POW, Judge Ed O'Connor Vietnam veteran.

ENTER AMY OSBORN, a Renaissance woman and Jersey Girl if ever there was one. This Ocean City native is a former Miss New Jersey and Miss New Jersey-USA, a fundraiser, former bank VP, USO producer and a voice for veterans in one way or another. Her work with veterans is vast, spanning the course of thirty years, and including different

presidentially approved positions. And she has not stepped gently into the water. The new director announced a "facelift" for the entire Museum, and she went to work disabusing the operation's unofficial title as 'the best-kept secret in the state.' Osborn said, "I tried to convince everyone that given the unprecedented reputation of this honored place, and the 1,565

people to whom we pay tribute for their heroism, this nickname was NOT a compliment." And she did not waste time finding the right messenger to tell the story of the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Museum, the only site of its kind in the nation.

VANESSA ROTH is an Academy Award-winning filmmaker whose work on social justice themes has won dozens of honors including the Sundance Special Jury Prize, The Golden Eagle, and an EMMY Award. Her films have been shown at the White House, in Congress and at the United Nations. Ms. Roth, and her equally awarded crew, embedded themselves in the NJVMM storytelling initiative and soon became part of the family.

Fast forward to October of 2023. Lights, cameras, and various electrical equipment are strewn about as the director interviews the many political and media stars who are an integral part of the institution. Visitors, students, and their teachers are being treated to a tour by the Vietnam veteran Docents who lead the educational classes-- men who returned home to face the perverse distortion of their honorable reality. In fact, they comprise a faculty of men who have collectively served over 35 years "In Country," seeing action in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard and have been awarded silver and bronze stars, over 15 Purple Hearts, countless Air Medals, Combat Infantry and Medical Badges. They are the beating heart of this Museum, and in the parlance of the military, they are "the real deal." Since its opening in 1998, over 250,000 visitors have thus far arrived

to bear witness to their reality.

Typical of the director's work, Vanessa Roth does not set out to win you over but rather to set the record straight; to provide a biting corrective to the countless anti-veteran opinions about the war. Her film ensures that the hardships and sacrifices of those who fought the war are not overshadowed by accounts of dissension at home or reports of atrocities committed by the troops. The main film, entitled A Place of Honor, was recently nominated for three awards in the GI Film Festival San Diego in May of 2025, and the New Jersey International Film Festival in June of 2025. It is recognized alongside two of the short films, In Our Shoes and Remembrance. At the Museum, and elsewhere, these films have been welcomed by sold-out audiences and standing ovations... along with many shed tears.

On a sunny day in October of 2023, at our hallowed wall of heroes, a high school marching band from Pleasantville, New Jersey, accompanied by their corps of cadets, numerous residents, faculty, and students--both current and former--have come together. They are there to honor their hometown hero, fallen Petty Officer James Edward Gosselin, who is being enshrined on the wall. A graduate of



NY Yankees manager Aaron Boone taking a tour with Vietnam veteran and tour guide Allen Rothman.

Pleasantville High School, and a decorated Navy Corpsman, killed in action on 2 February 1968, Jim Gosselin was erroneously recorded as being from another state and therefore was not originally on the NJ wall. Today, thanks to the concerted efforts of one of his classmates, Vietnam veteran and retired Lt. Col. Bill Leipold, Jim Gosselin is now with his brothers, on our revered wall of heroes.

THROUGH THE YEARS

there have been many notable visitors to our one-of-a-kind place, most recently Aaron Boone, the manager of the New York Yankees, who comes from baseball royalty, was part of another sold-out crowd at our museum, which Mr. Boone himself described as "moving ... and impactful." And the future lineup of guests is no less impressive.

Osborn's plans for the Museum are ambitious, but her commitment is unwavering. And with an enthusiastic staff, a dedicated Board of Trustees, seven of whom are Vietnam veterans, and a passionate group of Vietnam veteran Docents - men who never stopped loving their country, even after it stopped loving them - all promises will be kept. ■

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