

Day Trip

NJ VIETNAM VETERANS' MEMORIAL

By Joanne Colella

With the anniversary events of September 11 having just passed last month and the observance of Veterans' Day approaching next month, it seems as if this time of year brings to mind the sacrifices made by so many Americans, especially those who serve in uniform. The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, located in Holmdel at Exit 116 of the Garden State Parkway, represents an important period in the history not just of New Jersey, but of the entire nation. Welcoming countless visitors from throughout the country, it offers area residents a day trip opportunity that is not to be missed, right in their own backyard.

The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is a magnificent state memorial that pays tribute to those from the Garden State who were killed or are missing in action, as well as those that returned home from the Vietnam War and those who later passed away from war-related illnesses or injuries. The adjacent Vietnam Era Educational Center, the only one of its kind in the country, presents factual and unbiased information about that tumultuous era through the use of exhibits, audio/visual presentations, special programs, and guest speakers throughout the year.

A Call to Action

The idea of the memorial was first conceived in 1982 by a group of New Jersey veterans who attended the dedication of the National Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, DC. Over the course of 13 years, through the support of various legislators, veterans' groups, community organizations, corporations and businesses, and countless individuals, a grassroots effort to build a state memorial took shape. In January 1986, the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Committee was created within the Department of State, and was directed to select an appropriate site and design, then raise the necessary funds for construction. The committee selected the 5.5-acre site on the grounds of the PNC Bank Arts Center (formerly the Garden State Arts Center) in Holmdel from six possible sites across New Jersey, including Liberty State Park and Trenton. The location's rolling hills provided both the serenity and tranquility appropriate for a memorial, and in July of that year, dedication ceremonies were held at the site. Groundbreaking ceremonies took place on May 7, 1989, but construction did not begin for two and a half more years, in order to raise enough initial funding. The first phase of construction of the memorial began in November 1991 and, upon its completion, the memorial was dedicated on May 7, 1995, to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

The Memorial: Designed with Symbolism

In June 1987, a statewide competition began for the design of the memorial. The winning design was selected by a panel of experts from over 400 entries, and was submitted by Hien Nguyen, a naturalized American citizen who has escaped from Vietnam 13 years earlier. The design is a 200-foot diameter, open-air pavilion, lined with 366 highly polished black granite panels



— one for each day of the year. Each panel is engraved with the name, date of birth, and date of casualty of each New Jerseyan killed or missing on that date. The pedestrian tunnel entrances that lead to the memorial symbolize the transition from the safety and security of the real world to the very different realities of war, and the trees lining the walkways to the entrance are meant to evoke images of soldiers on tactical road patrol through the countryside. At the center of the pavilion stands a red oak, the official state tree, symbolizing the state from which the service men and women came and never returned. Under the tree, three impressive bronze figures, designed by Trenton sculptor Thomas Jay Warren, represent men and women of all races and origins, symbolizing those who came home, the women who served, and those who did not return.

Preliminary plans for the memorial's companion project, the Vietnam Era Educational Center, began in spring of 1993 as a result of the call for an educational component by veterans, students, and teachers in the state. Visits to other state memorials, as well as the national memorial in Washington, DC, demon-

strated the need to teach children about the Vietnam era and to develop an exhibit that would appeal to school age visitors as well as adult visitors, including Vietnam veterans and their families. In April 1994, a master plan was presented and served as the first step in the development of the center, and careful consideration of every facet ensued. Once the memorial structure on the site was completed, construction began on the Educational Center, which was ultimately dedicated on September 27, 1998.

The Educational Center: A Learning Experience

The Vietnam Era Educational Center is the first educational center and museum of its kind in the United States -- or the world -- and is devoted solely to gaining an understanding of the violent conflict in Southeast Asia and the surrounding political strife in America. It has received rave reviews from veterans and educators alike for its achievement in telling a balanced story of America's involvement in Vietnam and enabling visitors to attain a greater understanding of the myriad of forces that produced the conflict abroad and the dissension at home.

The 10,000-square-foot facility consists of three major components: an exhibition area, a multi-purpose room, and a resource center. The exhibition area, the largest area in the building, highlights the war's effect on the country through the use of an historic timeline, a circle of personal correspondence, flipbooks of personal photographs, touchscreen computers, and a testimony theater. The multi-purpose room is an area that can be used as a classroom for visiting school programs and for film presentations, lectures, and meetings. The resource room houses a library of books, periodicals, other reference materials, and several computers. Visitors may use the computers to review on-site resource materials and to access the Internet for additional research. Veterans and other visitors can also find biographies of the 1,557 New Jersey men and women who were killed in the conflict and can locate New Jerseyans who served in the armed forces from 1959 - 1975 and have enrolled in the Foundation's Veterans Recognition Project.

Throughout the year, there are also many special temporary exhibits, a film and lecture series, issue-related forums, ceremonies, and other special events held at the Memorial and Educational Center.

To learn more about the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Vietnam Era Museum & Educational Center, visit www.njvwmf.org. Or simply head to Exit 116 of the Garden State Parkway...and just visit. The memorial is open 365 days a year, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. There is no cost to visit the memorial, and on the first Saturday of each month, free tours by a Vietnam veteran tour guide are offered at 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. The Educational Center is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. and by appointment. Admission to the center is \$5 for adults, \$3 for seniors and students, and free for children age 10 or younger, for veterans of military service, and for active military personnel. On select holidays, free admission is offered to everyone.

