

# Army works to open Vietnam War exhibit

By David Vergun

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CARLISLE BARRACKS, Pa. (Army News Service, Sept. 1, 2015) -- The top of an ordinary-looking plywood box was adorned with lovely bamboo that resembled a cushy seat cover.

But looks can be deceiving. Anyone sitting or standing on the box would be in for quite a nasty surprise. It concealed a Viet Cong-style punji pit.

A man standing next to the box flipped a switch that triggered the top of the box to open. Inside were sharp spikes protruding upward.



Chad Reynolds, a combat veteran who served in the Army from 2004 to 2011, designed the box and the contraption after studying enemy punji pits that were dug during the Vietnam War. He spoke to veterans who had observed them.

He said that during the war, Soldiers sometimes stepped on these well-camouflaged trapdoors, which caused them to fall into a punji pit and be impaled on bamboo spikes, which were often coated with poison.

The punji pit and many other items from the Vietnam War are part of the U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center's new Vietnam War exhibit: "Courage, Commitment and Fear: The American Soldier in the Vietnam War," set to open Nov. 10.

Forty artifacts, some 80 images and several interactive exhibits will give visitors a realistic and immersive experience of the war, said Kris Hickok, museum technician at the Heritage Center. There will also be a film, "Our Journey Through War," of Vietnam War veterans telling their own personal stories.

The opening date is the day before Veterans Day and the exhibit is also timed to open just before the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Ia Drang. Fought Nov. 14-18, 1965, it was the Army's first major battle of the Vietnam War, he said.

For researchers or historians who want even more in-depth material, the Heritage and Education Center contains some 74,000 artifacts, including artifacts from Vietnam, located in 12,000 square feet of warehouse space. Additionally, there are hundreds of oral and written histories of Vietnam veterans collected over the years in the archive, Hickok said.

Hickok has led the Vietnam exhibit work that has been in progress now for two years.

Jack Giblin, chief of the center's visitor and education services, said that visitors can also see exhibits and research veterans stories from other time periods throughout Army history, not just Vietnam.

Most of the artifacts in each exhibit are tied to Soldiers' stories and experiences, he said.

## VIETNAM EXHIBIT PREVIEW

The center's staff provided a construction tour of the Vietnam exhibit at their fabrication shop, where workers were creating special effects.

Reynolds, the museum's technician, was working on a "spider hole," popup device. He explained that if a visitor pushes a button, a Viet Cong mannequin pops out of a hole. Reynolds said he designed the hydraulic scissor lift that moves the figure up and then back into the hole.

The exhibit could have been activated by a motion sensor, but the idea was rejected because it might trigger a reaction from a veteran with post-traumatic stress, he said, adding that the entire exhibit was reviewed for sensitivities in conjunction with Vietnam veterans.

Another interactive item that will be displayed is a U.S. bunker bomb with liquid inside, which visitors can pick up and hold. Reynolds added that if it gets dropped, it won't explode.

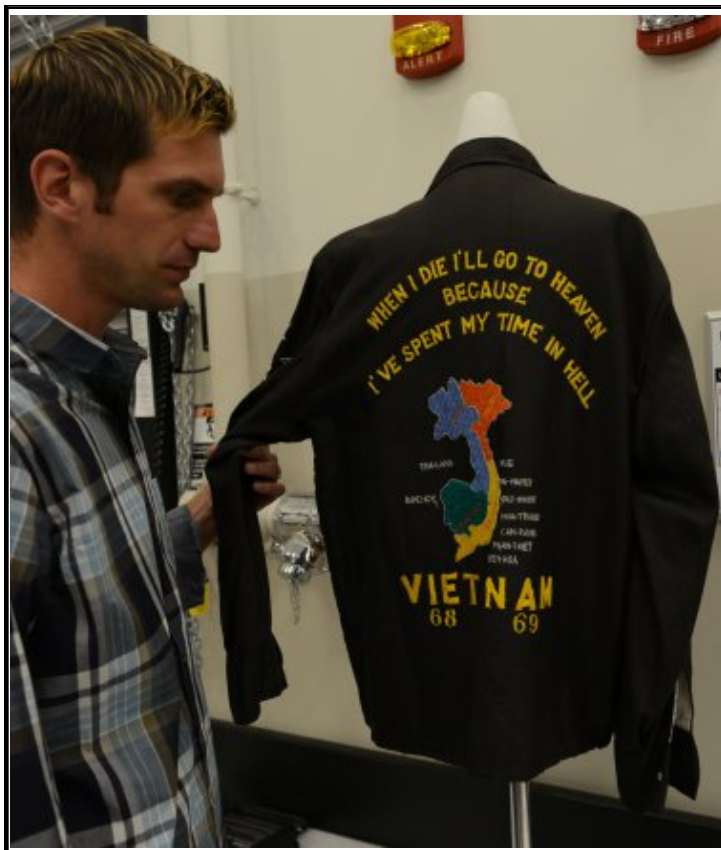
Nearby were other items, including jungle shrubbery, a bamboo Viet Cong prisoner transport cage and items that will go with a tunnel-rat display.

Some of the items that will be included in the exhibit are located in the center's conservation facility. Unlike the exhibit items in the fabrication shop, the items here are artifacts, Giblin said.

These were items donated by Soldiers. The conservators clean and prepare the items for display and, when necessary, restore the items to museum quality, Giblin said.

Hickok showed some of the items in the conservation lab that will be in the Vietnam exhibit.

A souvenir jacket owned by Spc. Joe Monroe, who served in I Corps in Da Nang from 1968 to 1969, is one such item. Hickok said Monroe, an Army truck driver, made it safely back to the United States and donated the jacket to the center.



There was a helmet cover with graffiti, including a peace sign. The peace sign seemed to be a popular symbol during the second half of the conflict, Hickok said.

Lt. Col. Hal Moore wrote a letter to his wife four hours before he went into battle at Ia Drang, Hickok said, showing the letter and the air mail envelop it came in. Moore commanded 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment during the battle.



There were also enemy artifacts including a Viet Cong's hand-drawn map of Newport Bridge near Saigon. Hickok said the map was used by the enemy during the 1968 Tet Offensive. The attack on the bridge was unsuccessful and a U.S. Soldier found it on a captured enemy combatant.

Another artifact was an inert Molotov cocktail. Hickok said the enemy would use any weapon they could get their hands on or make. Since the Molotov



cocktail is an artifact, it will be in a case display.

An interesting item was a bicycle wheel from a bicycle a North Vietnamese soldier used to transport supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It's more robust than a modern bicycle, he said, since the tire is made of solid rubber and can't go flat.

#### ALL SOLDIERS CAN TELL THEIR STORIES

Giblin said all Army Vietnam veterans - as well as Army veterans from other wars or even noncombat vets - are encouraged to tell their own stories and have them become a permanent record at the U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center, where they will be invaluable to researchers, historians, genealogists and others.

The center began collecting surveys from veterans during the Spanish-American War in 1898 and has been doing so ever since. The problem, Giblin said, is that the surveys were so many pages long, 15 to 20 pages, that many veterans were discouraged from filling them out.

Because "collecting Soldier history is important to us, we decided to shorten the survey to eight pages," he said. That was about a year ago. It's now available as a pdf download on the center's website.

"Every Soldier is important to the USAHEC [U.S. Army Heritage & Education Center]. Even a clerk who never left the states has important information," Giblin said. "Someday, a researcher may want to look back to see how the duties and responsibilities of a clerk has changed over time."

Besides researchers, Hollywood filmmakers are also interested in the center's archives, he said. Filmmakers who have visited the Heritage Center included those working on "We Were Soldiers," "Saving Private Ryan," "Band of Brothers," and Ken Burns' "The Civil War" TV series.

The center plans to follow up on many of the surveys by contacting the veterans and getting oral histories from them. Volunteers in the Veteran Ambassador Program will do this follow-up work, said Giblin, adding that more veteran ambassadors are needed should anyone be interested. Volunteers can be veterans located anywhere in the world.

The Veteran Ambassador Program started just a year ago, he said.

[http://www.army.mil/article/154709/Army\\_works\\_to\\_open\\_Vietnam\\_War\\_exhibit/](http://www.army.mil/article/154709/Army_works_to_open_Vietnam_War_exhibit/)

