



**"I'll be home for Christmas you can plan on me. Please have snow and mistletoe and presents on the tree..."** ~ Recorded by Bing Crosby, 1943



## Forgotten Warriors

BY BOB INGRAM



Standing tall at the Forgotten Warriors Museum at the airport in Rio Grande are (l-r) founders Tom and Theresa Collins and volunteers Tony and Janet Valenti.

While the Vietnam Wall across from the Convention Center in Wildwood has been getting all the ink, the Forgotten Warriors Vietnam Museum at the Cape May Airport in Rio Grande has been quietly going about its business of keeping alive the memory of the sacrifices made by our fighting forces in Vietnam since its opening two years ago.

Across from the better known NAS Wildwood Aviation Museum at the airport, the Forgotten Warriors Museum is an unassuming structure from the outside, but inside is a breathtaking display of memorabilia from the Vietnam War ranging from a Vietcong uniform to a separate room - hushed and reverent - with a flag-draped coffin and an urn containing the ashes of a dead soldier.

The president and founder of the Vietnam Museum - the only one of its kind in the country - is Tom Collins ("Just like the drink," he cracks), who, along with his wife Theresa, have devoted most of their waking hours to the Forgotten Warriors project.

A retired Delaware County police officer, Collins, 63, an Army sergeant first class who spent 13 months in-country as a helicopter door gunner, is now wheelchair-bound after losing a leg to Type II diabetes caused by Agent Orange contact in Vietnam. He also suffered neck and chest wounds.

Collins started the museum with a case of his own personal Vietnam memorabilia and "it just snowballed," he says. The Collinses plan to add another building soon because their goal is to show every donated article, not store some away like many museums do. They feel it is that important. They are in the process now of raising the \$12,000 that will be necessary.

The displays in the Forgotten Warriors museum represent every aspect of the Vietnam conflict. There is even a case of crossbows and a home-made rifle from the Montanyard tribes in the Viet highlands who fought with Special Forces troops as counter-insurgents.

In a section devoted to Vietcong and NRA equipment, there is a home-made gas mask used by that formidable enemy, as well as what appears to be a child's uniform, but is actually that of the diminutive VC. A VC pith helmet taken from a corpse on Hamburger Hill bears the deep tears of shrapnel.

"They told us never to throw anything away over there," Collins recalls, "because the enemy would find some way to use it." To demonstrate, he holds up a pair of Vietcong sandals made from discarded American tires.

Outside the museum is a Huey gunship that Tom Collins says was shot down eight times, and twice lost its entire crew of four. In front of the chopper is a large drum of the deadly Agent Orange that ultimately cost Collins his leg. Near it is a shrine to the 23 Cape May County warriors who died in Vietnam. On the building next to the museum is a Grandma Moses type mural depicting combat scenes in Nam. There is a deuce-and-a-half truck and an ambulance across the way. The scene is a fitting introduction to the abundance of memories that are stirred by the interior of the Forgotten Warriors museum.

Vietnam veterans react in various ways to the museum. "It helps most of them," Collins says. He recalls one man who came to the door on four separate occasions, looked inside, dropped a \$20 bill in the donation box at the door, and left. On his fifth visit he came inside.

The music that plays inside the museum is actual tapes from Armed Forces Radio in Vietnam, and the mostly rock music is interrupted occasionally by the voice of a disc jockey dedicating a song to a particular combat outfit or making a wisecrack a la "Good Morning, Vietnam."

On the subject of movies depicting the Vietnam conflict, Tom Collins says that, for his money, "We Were Soldiers," starring the now-disgraced Mel Gibson, came the closest to getting it right.

At one point, Collins says that he had his insurance agent appraise the contents of the Forgotten Warrior Vietnam Museum and the agent said that the contents were virtually irreplaceable and in that sense were priceless. No policy was written.

He is at some pains to point out that virtually every item in the museum was donated as word spread of the facility. A winner of both the purple heart and the silver star from upper Darby died, and a neighbor found his medals and other Vietnam mementos in the trash and donated them to the museum. "When we die, a lot of the time that kind of

stuff ends up in the trash or at a yard sale," Collins laments.

Visitors to the museum are sporadic. "We've had one person so far today,"

Collins said at noon. "If it rains, it's usually a good day for us. It's all by word of mouth. We can't afford advertising."

Hopefully, this story will help. It's a worthy undertaking, as well as a necessary one. America should have no forgotten warriors.

More information is available at [www.forgottenwarriors.org](http://www.forgottenwarriors.org)



L-R VIC HOLOWELL, US ARMY RET & TOM COLLINS, US ARMY (see story on this page) 121st Assault Helicopter Company stationed in Soc Trang, Vietnam



**SERGEANT JOSEPH E. MAHON**

of Wildwood Crest & N.E. Philadelphia (Tacony section)

3rd Bn., 13th Artillery-25th Infantry Division, U.S. Army TayNinh Province, Vietnam 1966



Aug 2010



**BERNARD H. ELDRIDGE, USN RET**

Note: Original photo is blurry

2nd from left Bernard H. Eldredge in Portsmouth England 1961, DEC

Bernard Eldredge is President USS Briarcliff Naval Enlisted Reserve Association Veterans Advocate, Fleet Reserves Association Veterans Advocate, New York Naval Militia Veterans Advocate. SENT IN BY BERNARD ELDRIDGE OF WILDWOOD CREST, NJ