



Bee/Jon Engellenner

Dann Spear holds just a small part of his collection. He said Vietnam veterans often return just

to contribute items to his museum — a memorial to the forgotten men and women.

Homage to Vietnam warriors

Marysville collection outgrowing homemade museum

By Jon Engellenner
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MARYSVILLE — Dann Spear's collection of Vietnam War memorabilia grew so large he had to build his own museum.

Yet his own-built Museum of the Forgotten Warriors — open only three months — is rapidly running out of room.

"A lot of these things were in trunks and attics. They were forgotten. That's where I got the idea for the museum. The American men and women who fought and died in the Vietnam War weren't forgotten," said Spear.

Spear, 31, admits his museum is small, especially compared to the war, which cost the United States 58,000 lives and \$150 billion. And his museum is off the beaten path, on A Road near the North Beale Road entrance to Beale Air Force Base.

The Vietnam War ended 10 years ago for America, but for many of the veterans visiting Spear's private museum, the wounds haven't quite healed.

Spear said Vietnam veterans tend to arrive alone.

"They are apprehensive. They don't know what their emotional reaction will be," he said. "Then they come back with their wives and children. Many have something to donate.

"When they're here alone, they're in deep thought. They spend a lot of time looking at the exhibits."

In the north wall is an alcove that will become a doorway into another wing of the museum to be built when Spear and his wife, Roberta, can afford it.

The exhibits, behind glass in a 16-by-25 former garage, include patches, uniforms, coins, medals, disarmed explosives and ammunition and an extensive collection of captured pistols, rifles and shotguns, many of them handmade.

Some of the weapons may have been fired only once, Spear said. A Viet Cong soldier, lying in ambush, would use his crude gun "to get something better," he said.

Donations have come from dozens of Vietnam veterans.

Bill Foster of Marysville, who served two infantry tours in Vietnam between 1967 and 1971, donated a captured Viet Cong flag, a holster and ammunition pouch.

Another donor, Steve Heliker of Chico, said the museum inspires "a lot of mixed emotions. It's like yesterday to me."

Spear said he has spent about \$4,000 on the building, and he has made a considerable investment in weapons purchased at gun shows.

But he doesn't take donations of money, telling the visitors, "This is your museum."

Starting with an old garage, he reframed the structure under its original roof and poured a new floor slab. When he ran out of building materials, he cannibalized a horse corral on his 5-acre homesite. The plate glass for the displays came from an old store.

Spear, now an employee of a paving contractor, was in high school when some of his friends served in Vietnam, and he started collecting patches. Although he didn't enter military service, Vietnam was to become his obsession.

His museum is an outgrowth of his collection — and of his conviction that American veterans of the war need this sort of personal memorial. It is open Thursday evenings and the first Saturday of each month.

"After they came home, they didn't want to talk about it, and I realized that they got a bad deal," he said. "It was an unpopular war, and they were not allowed to win.

"I guess the one word, in my opinion, what would sum it up, would be frustration. They weren't welcomed home. They had no time to wind down after their tours of duty. They would jump on an airplane and be home walking the streets in 24 hours.

"When I'd ask them about their experiences, they would say, 'We don't need to talk about this. Nobody wants to hear it.'"

Now Spear is trying to tell their story.

"A lot of guys have brought their sons in here. They are beginning to understand together what Vietnam was all about," he said.