

Memories

Vietnam vets reminisce at Museum of Forgotten Warriors

- The nation marks Veterans Day with patriotism and somber remembrances. Page A22.
- A holiday parade marches through downtown Sacramento. Page B1.

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MARYSVILLE — It is called the Museum of Forgotten Warriors, but Melvin Champion said the artifact in it brought back memories of his youth in a faraway place called Vietnam.

"I'm glad somebody's doing something," said Champion, who spent 1967, '68 and '69 ferrying supplies to troops on Vietnamese beachheads.

He had come with several dozen other Vietnam vets to a Veterans Day reunion at the museum, a converted garage on the open fields of Yuba County a few miles from Beale Air Force Base.

At the reunion, some vets hugged when they met. They talked of prisoners of war and warriors missing in action, speaking as if one truth was shared by all —

Americans must still be there.

They dressed in camouflage uniforms or motorcycle denims or fatigue shirts. There were patches and pins expressing pride in their status as Vietnam veterans.

They drank beer, coffee and punch, ate cake. And remembered.

"We lost a part of ourselves over there," said Champion, a charcoal company worker from Sacramento.

"When I went there I was 19 years old. There were guys there who were younger. We all lost part of our youth over there, and that part of our youth we've got to retain."

"It was as if you grew up over there."

The museum and the reunion were the work of Dann Spear, a man who never entered the service but feels it's necessary to give Vietnam veterans, like his growing-up buddies, a special place.

So in his garage, expanded now with plywood and 2x4s, he has gathered memorabilia.

There are the implements of war — enemy rifles,

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Vietnam vet Dennis Van Aistine of North Highlands was among those gathering in Marysville.

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pistols, hand grenades, even a Vietnamese hunting crossbow. On the road in front of the museum an observation helicopter sits not far from a tanklike Ontos artillery piece that fired 160mm shells, while inside friendly shells lie about a glass case near a collage of military unit patches.

There are mannequins dressed as North Vietnamese regulars and Viet Cong. Another is in a U.S. pilot's flight suit.

There are war scrapbooks and pieces of propaganda. One plexiglass case holds the story of a Marysville sergeant who is missing in action. A wreath rests beneath it.

And there are the frames, each containing memorabilia from a different soldier — Polaroid pictures with friends, letters, citations, diplomas from military schools.

"It gives guys a place to go," said William Barrett of Carmichael, a vet who cleared jungles as a combat engineer in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970. "They think of what they've done. The places they've seen. Some good memories . . . some of the places I partied in Vietnam. Some bad memories . . . combat, some of

the weapons used against us."

On Tuesday, about 50 people showed up at the reunion: veterans, wives, friends and kids.

Tony Pinto was there with his 2½-year-old step-grandson, Nicholas Bonham, who understands what the American flag is but probably wasn't aware what the memorabilia represented.

"I plan to bring him out periodically as he grows," said Pinto, of Yuba City, who served in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968. "I'm going to tell him it was just a big mistake. A big politician war."

"But at the time I was patriotic and proud and went and did the thing that was honorable."

Spear, the museum curator, has obtained documentary videotapes on Vietnam that CBS produced. The television images flickered on a screen in the museum; shots crackled from the speaker from time to time.

And there were audio tapes of '60s music, and Army updates from the Armed Forces Vietnam Network.

At one point Tuesday, a Byrds song filtered through the air: "To everything, turn, turn, turn . . . There is a season, turn, turn, turn . . . and a time to every purpose, under heaven . . ."