

Veterans Day: A place where nothing is forgotten



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Remembrance is unavoidable at the Museum of the Forgotten Warriors.

The museum, just off North Beale Road near Beale Air Force Base, is packed, literally, to the ceiling with war artifacts and memorabilia ranging back to the Revolutionary War.

There's a tiny jar of soil from a Gettysburg peach orchard, rusted parts from a shot-down German World War II plane, a cannonball recovered at Fredericksburg, Va., and several bullets that were pulled from the breastbone of a soldier who landed on the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion.

And that's just one row.

In all, the museum contains more than 60,000 artifacts displayed throughout two buildings and 8,000 square feet.

It represents a life-long passion of its owner Dann Spear, who started the collection when he was 10 years old.

Almost every piece in the museum has a story.

Not all of America's conflicts are covered here, but in honor of Veterans Day, Spear shared some of the stories of artifacts that span the history of American warfare.

The Revolutionary War

The stories start with two bullets. They look nothing like normal bullets — they're round and resemble marbles. They date back to the Revolutionary War.

One bullet was fired by the British soldiers. It is almost a perfect sphere, expertly shaped and manufactured in a factory. The other is from an American soldier. It looks like a deformed version of the British bullet. It's handmade and riddled with imperfections.

Together the two encapsulate the common narrative of the conflict — the rigid, trained and wealthy army of the mighty British Empire against the grassroots, guerrilla assembly of American revolutionaries.

The Civil War

Moving forward in time, Spear pointed out several pieces of original hardtack that were eaten by soldiers in the Civil War. The square crackers were a main source of food for Union and Confederate soldiers, who gave the rock-hard substance such endearing nicknames as "molar breakers" and "worm castles."

The crackers are remarkably intact given that they are more than 150 years old. "Nothing would eat it," Spear said.

World War I

For World War I, Spear has a complete uniform commonly worn during the conflict. It was not given to Spear, but purchased at a flea market. Spear frequently scours such events in search of memorabilia.

World War II

The next piece Spear displayed is one of the most unique artifacts in his museum. It's a small jar containing thin splotches of oil. It leaked from the bulkhead of the USS Arizona, which was bombed and sunk at Pearl Harbor in 1941. The oil was collected by a dive team sent down to check the broken battleship's hull integrity and to measure fuel leakage.

"We call it holy water and the tears of the crew," Spear said. "There are so many people entombed down there. People get very somber when they think about what that oil means."

Korean War

Spear followed that up with another rare piece — a padded winter uniform worn by North Korean soldiers during the Korean War. Spear said he has only seen one other like it in all his years of collecting.

In general, artifacts from the Korean War are more rare, Spear said.

"The soldiers, many who already went to World War II, didn't want to go to Korea," Spear said.

"They didn't want to bring home souvenirs. They had seen too much."

Vietnam War

The artifact from Vietnam that Spears chose was given to him by local veteran Greg Foster. It's a medal that the North Vietnamese army gave to soldiers who shot down an enemy helicopter. Foster piloted a helicopter in the war. One night, his commanding officer wanted to take the helicopter up at night. Foster advised against it, saying it was too dangerous. The officer did it anyway, and it was shot down, killing the entire crew.

Later, when the American soldiers took out the enemy gun that had shot the helicopter down, they recovered the medal.

"He's a pretty tough guy, but he broke down when he gave that to me," Spear said.

Afghanistan

Heading into the 21st century, Spears pointed out a uniform that was worn by the first woman to be awarded the Combat Medical Badge, Cpl. E. Thomson.

Thomson saved the life of an Afghan boy while serving in Afghanistan. The family was poor, they had dirt floors and a door that was just a piece of cloth, but to thank Thomson, the father of the boy hand-hammered a pair of bracelets. They are on display next to the uniform.

"This uniform has been through a lot. The stories are yours now," Thomson wrote to Spears when she gave him the uniform.

Iraq

The stories ended on a sad note, with Spears showing a display with the last letter written by

Rueben Lopez, a soldier from Williams in Iraq.

The first line reads, "I want this to be read at my funeral." Lopez wrote the letter in February 2011. He was killed in action that August.

But while that was the last story, the tour of the museum ended with a stop at a display sent by General Lloyd Austin III, a four-star general who was once the commanding general of Iraq. The display includes a number of pieces from Austin's desk and a plaque addressed to the museum. It reads: "Thank you for keeping the spirit and memory of our nation's warriors alive for all to admire, respect, and never forget."

"That's the essence of this place," Spear said.