

Preserving the Past
for Future Generations

VETERANS MEMORIAL MUSEUM



The Veterans Memorial Museum, one of Huntsville's little-known treasures, can be found just off Airport Road across from the city's municipal golf course. It occupies a relatively nondescript pale blue building formerly used as the Huntsville city jail.

Anyone who ventures to visit the museum will know they are in the right place when they see the restored "Huey" helicopter, Vietnam era river patrol boat, and a variety of armored personnel carriers on display outside. These outside displays, although impressive, barely set the stage for the amazing collection of vehicles and memorabilia awaiting inside!

The Veterans Memorial Museum is the brainchild and lifelong work of retired LTC Randy Withrow. Randy, the founder and curator of the museum has been interested in military history and memorabilia his entire life and has been an avid collector since he was a teenager. His collection addiction started with a German helmet that he "just had to have" at age 10, and has continued to this day. It is absolutely amazing that a 10-year-old boy's obsession with a helmet turned into one of the most impressive military museums in the Southeast if not the United States.

In 1986 while on active duty with the U.S. Army Randy took the first step towards the current

museum by founding the Alabama Center for Military History Inc., the entity that operates the Veterans Memorial Museum.

Many military museums offer a thorough array of uniforms, documents, small arms and other memorabilia to connect the visitor with military history. This is what you might expect the first time you visit Huntsville's Veterans Memorial Museum. However, what you will discover is a fascinating array of full sized, rare, and in many cases, fully functional military vehicles and aircraft spanning World War II to current day. Also present is an impressive collection of the aforementioned uniforms, documents, small arms and other memorabilia that go back all the way to the Revolutionary war!

Upon walking into the main gallery of the museum visitors may be overwhelmed! Elevated above the collection and looking down on you from the far end are the famous and very recognizable "Sioux" and "Kiowa" helicopters. Anyone who has seen the opening of the hit TV show M*A*S*H will recognize the "Sioux" helicopter.

Off to the right your attention might be drawn to the menacing rotor blades of the "Cobra" attack helicopter, or you might just stare straight ahead at the cannons of the four World War II tanks pointing towards the center passageway. To be technically

correct, one of the Sherman tanks sports not a cannon but actually a flamethrower disguised as a cannon! These were used primarily in the Pacific during World War II and there were only about 100 of them made.

Or you might immediately notice a full sized, fully restored, French military railroad car off to your left. Known as a 40 & 8, this actual railroad car is one of 49 that were sent over from the people of France full of gifts to the United States following World War II.

One was sent to each state and one was to be shared between Washington DC and the territory of Hawaii. As the knowledgeable museum tour guides will tell you the shared car went to Washington DC first, and is said to have been emptied of all gift contents before it was sent to Hawaii!

While the large and truly impressive vehicle display is astonishing, the most remarkable sight is nestled in between them. The museum hosts the most complete collection of Jeeps in the world! This collection, laid out in chronological order, starts with the oldest Jeep in the world, Ford's pilot model #1, handcrafted by Ford engineers and technicians over the course of 30 days in 1940.

Next in line is another historically significant Jeep with a



very interesting history, the Ford “GP” prototype (one of only 1500 produced). This is one of the first military Jeeps ever sold surplus to a civilian. It was sold to Fred Heine, the mayor of Lucas, Kansas in 1943 for \$750. Prior to that sale no civilian had ever owned a Jeep. It is easy to make the argument that this is the very vehicle that started the Jeep craze which is still quite rampant today!

Many of the other vehicles and memorabilia displayed at the museum have interesting histories also. For instance, the Huey helicopter on display at the front door was used in the filming of the Mel Gibson movie “We Were Soldiers” and was actually flown in Vietnam. One of the M1 Garand rifle replicas on display was used in the Tom Hanks movie “Saving Private Ryan”. As you will surely discover with the aid of any one of the many dedicated tour guides, these stories go on and on...

Volunteering at the Museum involves a lot more than just being a “tour guide”. The corps of very dedicated volunteers (which number approximately 15), do everything from cleaning the

floors and bathrooms to restoring unbelievably rare vehicles and artifacts. Since the Museum has no paid employees Randy depends on the dedication of the volunteers to help keep this enterprise functioning smoothly. Anyone who has been involved in running a business, will understand all of the behind the scenes efforts necessary to make sure all visitors have a good experience and to ensure the organization stays healthy. The team consists of: administrators, computer experts, people with accounting backgrounds, organizers, mechanics, fabricators, and just plain hard workers dedicated to the cause!

The Veterans Memorial Museum contributes to the northern Alabama community in other ways, too. It partners with the Army’s Command and General Staff College course taught at Redstone Arsenal (portions of the course are now hosted and taught at the Museum), hosted part of the Army Aviation and Missile Command Leadership Program and the “Army Values” indoctrination.

The museum also provided, for the eighth time, a venue for the Madison County High Schools Social Sciences History Fair. Additionally, the VMM supports local school systems with tours and classes on United States military history and provides speakers to visit school classrooms on request.

The VMM participated in the Huntsville Veterans Day parade with over one dozen historic military vehicles, including transportation for the parade’s grand marshal, General Lynn Collyar Commanding General of U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command, and to World War II veterans.

The Huntsville Veterans Memorial Museum continues the construction and addition of displays, expansion of archives, research and learning center.

The Veterans Memorial Museum, is a nonprofit, tax-exempt educational institution founded for the purpose of historical preservation, public display, and public education. The museum is dedicated to memorializing the deeds of American military men



and women placing emphasis is on participants of World War II and subsequent conflicts. The museum operates entirely on corporate and public donations with an all-volunteer staff for the museum of approximately 12 to 15 individuals with no paid employees.

For more information about The Veterans Memorial Museum, call (256) 883-3737, or find us on the web at facebook.com/memorialmuseum or memorialmuseum.org. Hours of operation are Wednesday through Saturday, 10 AM to 4 PM. ■



*Veterans Memorial Museum supports
the Huntsville Museum of Art
“World War II Exhibition”*

I can't tell you how well the Memories of World War II exhibition was received. The viewing audience was moved, sometimes to tears, by the images and artifacts in the exhibition. I believe that this was brought about, in no small part, by the addition of the objects from the Veterans Memorial Museum's excellent collection.

By including objects from the VMM that directly connected with the actual photographs, it brought home to our audience the fact that these incredible events happened to real people who could have touched the very objects displayed alongside the photos. The images were no longer “history”, they were a time machine that could take the viewer back to 1941-45.

All too often, we think that our fathers and grandfathers and for that matter our mothers and grandmothers will always be around for us to ask, “What was it like...” Like all things people eventually leave this earth and what we have left are objects and images to mark their passing and to tell their stories. These artifacts remind us of the immense sacrifice that was made for us and for the world. It is a credit to the men and women of the US armed forces that the VMM has amassed such an outstanding collection of artifacts, weapons and vehicles from such a wide ranging time period.



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