



The following news release was made to twenty-five national publications on 3 September 1998.

National Vietnam War Museum Planned for North Texas

Mineral Wells – Growing from a desire to bring honor to the many veterans who served in Vietnam, a group of former US Army helicopter pilots is planning to build a national museum in Mineral Wells, Texas. The decision to create the first national museum dedicated to the preservation of artifacts and information specific to this crucial period in our nation's history was not taken lightly.

Upon completion, the museum will be the definitive cultural and historical resource for the Vietnam era, featuring cutting-edge, inter-active exhibits based on scholarship of the highest order. It will be a place to remember, to understand, and to learn lessons from the past. Now, twenty-five years after the peace accords between the United States and North Vietnam, the time is right to integrate the Vietnam War into a larger historical and cultural framework. The National Museum of the Vietnam War seeks to serve as the common ground for reflection and resolution.

The beginnings of the museum revolve around an event that was primarily social in nature. In September of 1995, a group of former US Army Helicopter pilots, all Vietnam veterans, met at the American Legion hall in Mineral Wells. The purpose of the meeting was to determine whether there was enough interest in forming a local chapter of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilots Association (VHPA). This is a national veterans organization of which they were all members.

Based on the turnout at this initial meeting, there was more than enough support for the idea, and the Fort Wolters Chapter of the VHPA was formed. The name was selected because the former Fort Wolters, located in Mineral Wells, was the location of the Army's Primary Helicopter School. As Such, it was the training ground for about 98% of the helicopter pilots who flew in Vietnam.

In attendance at this initial meeting were several members who wanted to do more than just meet socially. They were looking for a way to acknowledge what Fort Wolters, Mineral Wells, and Vietnam had meant to them. It was here that the idea for a museum surrounding those three themes was born, with the creation of the historical/museum committee.

The original concept was for a modest museum incorporating the significance of Fort Wolters in the history of the city, and its contribution in training Vietnam era helicopter pilots. This idea was heartily embraced by the local chapter members, and was presented to the executive committee of the national organization at the 1996 reunion in Santa Clara, California. Buoyed by the encouragement of the national executive committee, the museum committee began work in earnest.

The next year was spent in planning strategy, creating relationships with the city, and investigating possible sites for the museum. At this point, with still modest goals, the committee was looking at existing buildings that might be donated for use as a museum facility. While there were promising sites, the process was moving very slowly. At the same time, possible fund raising concepts were being explored.

Museum committee member Cleve Clark, of Mineral Wells, suggested engraved memorial bricks, a concept used successfully by many organizations. Brick sales were begun at the VHPA reunion in Orlando in 1997, and have provided a steady, albeit low, source of funding. In addition to the memorial bricks

honoring individuals, the museum also began offering larger memorial tablets for unit memorials. The initial purchasers of these tablets have been Vietnam aviation company associations.

When the museum concept was presented to the general membership in Orlando, the museum committee felt that there was sufficient interest to continue work on the project. This was supported by the interest of the general population, shown during the group's participation in the 1997 Mineral Wells Crazy Water Festival.

While the museum activity continued to build, the Chapter was engaged in another project that was to be a watershed event for both. The Fort Wolters Chapter was to host the 1998 VHPA reunion in Fort Worth. Not only would this be an opportunity to demonstrate Texas hospitality to our national membership, but it would bring many former helicopter pilots back to the place of their birth, so to speak. The museum committee felt this was our best opportunity to garner a national base of support for the museum, building on the interest sparked in Orlando.

Because the committee was composed of volunteers, all of whom were also gainfully employed, there was little time to take on any additional responsibilities. This was particularly true since many of them were also working on the reunion committees. So, a Fort Worth public relations firm, DGPR, was engaged to assist in planning for a fund raising campaign to be introduced at the 1998 reunion. Through working with DGPR, the committee realized they were thinking on too small a scale when it was determined that no national museum, dedicated to the study of the Vietnam War, existed.

It was decided that a national venue, encompassing all aspects of the war, and a much larger constituency was now an appropriate goal for the committee. This feeling was echoed by the Chapter membership as well. The vision for the museum is to create an atmosphere of learning that will engage people of all ages, nationalities, and political points of view. A thematic approach to the war will be used, with the following eight themes interwoven throughout the museum:

- The Cold War
- The Nation and Culture of Vietnam
- Vietnam War Chronology
- The Conduct of the War
- The Home Front
- Technology and the War
- War's End and Aftermath
- Fort Wolters

While the museum will have a specific point of view, a deliberate attempt will be made to present a balanced view of the historical facts, perceptions, and consequences of the War. The Museum will be relevant and meaningful to everyone.

When the museum committee participated in the 1997 Crazy Water Festival, it began a close relationship with the City of Mineral Wells. In an effort to maintain and extend that relationship, the committee, through the leadership of member Jim Messinger, worked for many months to bring the Vietnam Moving Wall to the city for the Fourth of July. Messinger's motivation was simple. "I had always wanted to experience the Wall," Messinger said. "It will be an emotional closure activity for everyone including the community. The community of Mineral Wells is largely made up of ex-military."

The amount of interest generated in the community became evident during the months that the Chapter members and the City worked together in preparation for the Wall. Virtually every civic organization in Mineral Wells provided support for the week-long visit, from June 28 through July 5. This visit was scheduled to coincide with the VHPA 1998 reunion, and was one of the scheduled events on July 3.

In addition to the July 3 visit of the helicopter pilots, the Wall visit was marked by opening ceremonies on June 28 that included remarks by US Congressman Stenholm, and Air Force Major General Richard

Brown, a 1966 graduate of Mineral Wells High School. General Brown flew 140 combat missions in Vietnam in 1971-72. The ceremonies were also marked by a Confederate Air Force flyover, an honor guard, and "missing man" formation featuring F-16s, and a bugler sounding "Taps."

Because of the intense community involvement, the visit of the Wall has cemented the relationship between the Museum and the City, and given additional impetus to locating the Museum in this small North Texas town. Currently, the museum board is negotiating for a piece of property on the old Fort Wolters reservation. A fund raising project called "honorary landowners" is now underway. This project is directed specifically at the purchase of the property, and will be open to only 200 individual participants. Once the property is acquired, there will be a national design competition announced for the museum building and grounds.

The development and construction of this museum is important not only to the committee, but to the country as well. For many Americans, Vietnamese, and others, the war in Vietnam was the defining event of their lives. It was a conflict that divided families and brought violence both to Vietnam and the United States. Whether in uniform or not, each of us had a Vietnam experience. Now a national museum is envisioned to help us remember and understand. In the words of museum committee chairman Jim Irwin: "The memories of the veterans who took the call and went to the war because the government asked them to, can't continue to be tainted. It's time for us to get out in the sun. We did a good job. The museum will give a comprehensive history of the Vietnam War political as well as military activities."

Anyone desiring more information or wishing to make a contribution, may contact the museum at the National Museum of the Vietnam War, P.O. Box 146, Mineral Wells, TX 76068, or on line at www.nationalvnwarmuseum.org.