There and Back
New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation
Curator: Mike Thornton
June 2022–March 2023
Exhibit Website: https://www.njvvmf.org/thejourneytovietnamandhome/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.300

One of the most absorbing artifacts in *There and Back* at the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation's Vietnam Era Museum in Holmdel comes at the very end of the exhibition: a handmade "Welcome Home" sign, once hung on a Brooklyn awning for a soldier named Rick Amsterdam. Amsterdam came home from Vietnam in April of 1971 to a deeply divided country. At the end of the month, 12,000 anti-war demonstrators were arrested in Washington, DC, during the May Day protests (the largest mass arrest in American history). Lovingly painted in red, white, and blue with stars, stripes, and hearts, the banner is a visceral reminder of the ways in which the personal and the political can become intertwined. The label quotes Amsterdam: "Our country was in total disarray, yet my mother and sister only cared about me, and they wanted everyone to know that I was welcomed home."

Courtesy Susan Gail Johnson

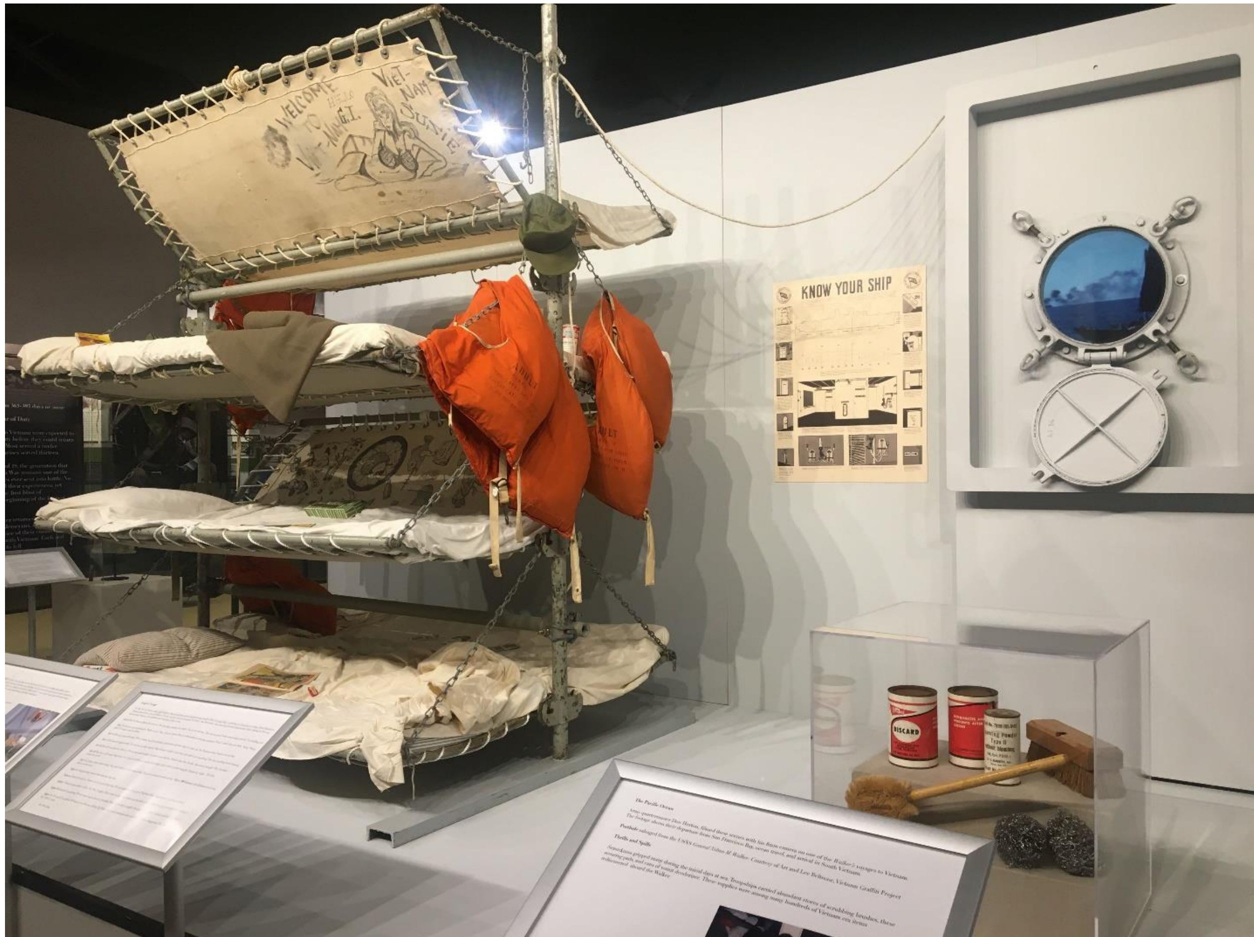
There and Back is a temporary exhibit situated in the center of a large, circular, permanent gallery that exhaustively chronicles the Vietnam War through text panels and images (and the 1960s itself through a large-scale photographic montage). Standing apart from this larger narrative, *There and Back* asks a seemingly simple question on the introductory text panel: "What was it like to go to Vietnam and return?" Through a tightly edited selection of artifacts, first-person accounts, and vernacular photographs, the exhibition asks visitors to think deeply about the answer. What must it have been like for a very young soldier—the average age was only 19—to journey to and from a troubling war halfway around the world?

The introductory text panel tells visitors that more than 2 million personnel were deployed to Vietnam between 1955 and 1975. Many of them crossed the Pacific on World War II–era troopships—a journey that could take as long as 25 days. Many of the same soldiers came home in the relative blink of an eye—24 hours on a commercial airliner. That difference, and the psychological toll it must have taken, is at the heart of the exhibition's story.

The first half of the exhibition focuses on the soldiers' journey by sea. Troopships carried 3,500 men to Vietnam on each trip—berthed in canvas bunks stacked four high. One of these ships, the *General Nelson M. Walker*, was placed in reserve in 1968 and discovered nearly untouched decades later by film consultants Art and Lee Beltrone. The troopship story is told through artifacts from this ship. The objects on view are remarkable, as is the very fact of their preservation. The dominant artifact is a stack of eight canvas bunks where soldiers slept. Bored, anxious young men covered the bottoms of the bunks above them in doodles: names of girlfriends, dates at sea, naked women with bouffant hairdos.

Other artifacts speak to what life onboard must have been like. A case carefully displays discarded candy wrappers, liquor bottles, and military-issued playing cards and rosary beads found

on the ship, while another holds scouring pads and cans of vomit deodorizer testifying to the common occurrence of onboard seasickness. These artifacts remind the visitor that memory is kept, and meaning is made not only by monumental works of art, or even dedicated memorials, but in the detritus of everyday life. The mundane nature of these objects prompts visitors to imagine how they themselves might have felt making the same journey.



Courtesy Susan Gail Johnson

The next part of the journey, the tour of duty, is a pivot point in the exhibition. A text panel explains that most soldiers served a yearlong tour of duty before returning home, but that 58,220 Americans (and 1,563 New Jerseyans) never did. The show respectfully tells the story of just one of these soldiers who did not return, Lance Corporal William “Billy” Dutches USMC. His helmet

cover, inscribed with his girlfriend's name, was returned to the family 55 years after the young man died in battle, and is displayed here in its own case. One soldier's story standing in for many.

The second half of the exhibition tells the story of Vietnam Civil Airlift. Between 1965 and 1970, commercial airliners made an average of 21 flights per day, eventually carrying more than 5 million personnel back and forth. This part of the exhibition shifts its focus from soldiers to the young women—still called stewardesses and still subject to sexist rules about height, weight, age, and marital status—who found themselves caring for the soldiers returning home on flights nicknamed "Freedom Birds." This story is told through airline artifacts and ephemera, including a row of airliner seats (mirroring the troopship bunks), as well as first-person accounts from women who worked on these flights.

Courtesy Susan Gail Johnson

A blue TWA smock testifies to the important, complicated role these women played for returning soldiers. The uniform is adorned with military patches and medals given to its owner, Sharon Eldred. The insignia were tokens of gratitude, certainly, but also, perhaps, acts of protest. In April 1971 (the same month Rick Amsterdam came home), the antiwar group Vietnam Veterans Against the War threw hundreds of medals and ribbons on the steps of the US Capitol Building during a demonstration. What did it mean to a soldier to give his medal to Eldred—a woman he would probably never meet again? And what did it mean to her to receive them? As with Amsterdam's "Welcome Home" banner—the personal and the political are wrapped up together in one remarkable object.

It is through moments like this that exhibition curator Mike Thornton has woven a compelling and touching narrative that concretizes a very human, very relatable part of the larger story of the Vietnam War. His exhibition, carved out of the center of the larger gallery, is an intervention in the best sense of the term. It stands out not only because of its subject matter, but because of Thornton's attention to the fundamentals of curation—a feel for meaningful, carefully selected artifacts; the discipline to write short, straightforward text panels; and a respect for first-person voices drawn from a network of community members. The exhibition suggests that there are many more stories that can be told around (or at the center of) a complicated and uncomfortable moment in American history. This visitor looks forward to seeing what comes next.

Susan Gail Johnson
SGJ Consulting LLC