Welcome Home!

Connecticut’s commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War was held this past July at the CT Air National Guard Base and the New England Air Museum, where veterans of the war gathered together to share a welcome home that was long overdue. Their families, friends, and other supporters came from all parts of the state and further to be a part of this unforgettable reunion that was backdropped by the memory and honor of the heroes who served but were not able to be there.

The Vietnam 50th began and ended for many of the Vietnam veterans at the “Vet Tent,” where tags were distributed bearing the branch of service to which the veteran belonged and the years they served during the war—essential conversation starters for Marines, Army, Navy, Coast Guard, or Air Force vets. The Department of Defense was on hand to welcome all Vietnam veterans and present them with an official Vietnam 50th Commemoration lapel pin. The Vet Tent served as a meeting ground, a virtual landing zone or rally point for vets to reunite after so many years apart and were honored together for their service to our country. We witnessed many happy and tearful reunions amongst the vets. (continued on pg. 4)

(Photos courtesy of Kevin Suarez & Gary Espelin MSG (Ret).)
WELCOME, COMMISSIONER CONNOLLY!

By Joseph L. Giasullo

Atop the ninety-two plus acres of the Rocky Hill Connecticut Department of Veterans’ Affairs (CTDVA) campus sits an old, outworn brick building overlooking a parking lot meant for the employees who work there. One reserved parking space, set only a few steps away from the front door of the building, was left unfilled. It belongs to the commissioner of the CTDVA, but rather than use that coveted spot, the commissioner modestly chooses to park alongside his employees.

Sean Connolly has been the commissioner of the CTDVA for a little over seven months. When I interviewed the commissioner, he explained that his and the CTDVA’s most significant achievements in that relatively short time include filling all five temporary homes in Patriots’ Landing (transitional housing for veterans located across from the CTDVA campus) with veterans and their families. He also broke ground for the approximately three-million-dollar expansion project to raise the capacity of the state veterans’ cemetery in Middletown with an above-ground 3000 niche columbarium. The cemetery already has over seven-thousand veterans honored there. Within the next year, Commissioner Connolly hopes to transform the campus and the seventy-five year old buildings. The commissioner plans to reinvigorate and reimagine the physical structure of the CTDVA, as well as the programs they provide to veterans.

Part of what attracted Commissioner Connolly to the CTDVA was his own experience as an active-duty Army JAG (Judge Adjutant General) officer of seven years and his current service as an Army Reservist for the past eight years. He dedicated his military career to law and viewed the position of Commissioner of the CTDVA as an opportunity to apply his experience to benefit those who have served and continue to serve as Connecticut veterans. He mentioned, “the public service string was pulling at my heart,” and that he jumped at the opportunity to lead a team that will make Connecticut a leader in the nation again in serving its veterans, like it had in the 1800s, when Connecticut opened the United States’ first ever home for veterans.

What helps make Commissioner Connolly such a strong leader is his experience as an active duty soldier. When he deployed to Kuwait and convoyed into Iraq in 2003 with the 159th Aviation Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division as a captain, the Commissioner felt a strong gratification from simply being amongst soldiers and a part of a team. He admitted that it was a great experience to be “a soldier with other soldiers” while on the convoy—doing normal soldier things rather than his normal duty as the brigade’s lawyer. So, back in Connecticut, in a position of leadership again, the concept of gratification he feels for his job is most strongly present when he is on the road “getting to be out with veterans.” He regularly visits with vets all over the state who continuously inspire him. In September, the commissioner had the honor of presenting the Connecticut Wartime Service Medal to over 100 Connecticut veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. To physically be there with them pinning those medals on, the Commissioner explained, “is hugely satisfying.” (continued on pg. 3)
Alligator Shoes

An Army Ranger was on holiday in the depths of Louisiana, where he tried to buy some Alligator shoes. However, he was not prepared to pay the high prices. After failing to haggle the vendor down to a reasonable price level, he ended up shouting, "I don't give two hoots for your shoes, man. I'll go and kill my own!" The shopkeeper replied, "By all means. Just watch out for the two Marines who are doing the same." So the Ranger went out into the Bayou, and after a while saw two men with spears standing still in the water. "They must be the two Marines," he thought. Just at that point he noticed an alligator moving in the water towards one of them. The Marine stood completely passive, even as the gator came ever closer. Just as the beast was about to swallow him, the Marine struck home with his spear and wrestled the gator up onto the beach, where several already lay. Together the two Marines threw the gator onto its back, whereupon one exclaimed, "Damn! This one doesn't have any shoes either!"

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After leaving the Vet Tent, many of the veterans and the general public made a bounding maneuver to the next biggest hit of the day: the Huey rides! Some rode the iconic chopper for nostalgia’s sake—to remember the sound and the feel of those birds soaring. Others rode to experience what it might have felt like for our veterans to fly through the air 50 years ago. Many of the Vietnam veterans shared the experience with their families, including one former Huey pilot, Kjell Tollefsen, who actually flew co-pilot for his family’s flight. The Huey rides were a hit for everyone and left a lasting impression on veterans and civilians alike.

Other events included speeches by Governor Malloy, Commissioner Connolly, Paul Bucha (Medal of Honor recipient), General Bill Begert, and General Ed Mechenbier (former POW at the infamous Hanoi Hilton); book talks by Bill Guenon, James Jordan, Arthur Wiknik, and Sam Beamon; static aircraft displays at the CT Air National Guard Base and the New England Air Museum, military reenactments; and veteran oriented vendors, to include the federal and Connecticut Department of Veterans’ Affairs and a live concert performed by the U.S. Coast Guard Band. The commemoration accomplished in a single day what Vietnam veterans have been waiting for over the last 50 years—recognition and appreciation for their proud service. Testimonies from veterans took a tone of enthusiasm, nostalgia, and, more than anything, gratification when asked about their experiences from that day. Each had his or her favorite part of the weekend, but all agreed that it was a moment they will never forget.

To view more of the images from the Vietnam 50th Commemoration navigate to the Vietnam Commemoration website at: www.ccsu.edu/vietnam/Photosnvideo.html or the VHP Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/vhp.ccsu/photos_stream.

(Photos courtesy of Kevin Suarez & Gary Espelin MSG (Ret).)
TRAVELING GOLD STAR PROJECT

The Central Connecticut State University Veterans History Project teamed up with Professor Mary Collins’s nonfiction writing students at CCSU to gather stories from Connecticut Gold Star families that lost a son, brother, or husband in Vietnam. Many have never shared their stories in public before.

Now, fifty years later, Connecticut citizens have a chance to see and feel the power of the Gold Star families’ stories. The Gold Star exhibit is a six panel traveling display that debuted on July 11-12, 2015 at the Connecticut Air National Guard Base in East Granby for the Vietnam 50th Commemoration event.

This inspiring exhibit is now touring the state, visiting libraries and other public buildings in an effort to share its message with as many people as possible in hopes that the Gold Star families will never be forgotten and to help in the healing process for those who lost loved ones during times of war, whether it be Vietnam, Korea or any other war in which America has been involved.

The exhibit is currently located at the Silas Bronson Library in Waterbury, Connecticut. The Gold Star exhibit is scheduled to continue traveling around the state according to the schedule listed below.

Silas Bronson Library: October 23 – December 11
Wolcott Public Library: December 14 – February 1
Terryville Public Library: February 3 – March 23
CCSU Elihu Burritt Library: March 23 – May 12

All dates are tentative. Please call the location to confirm the exhibit’s arrival.

IN MEMORIAM

Angelo Tomasso, Jr., born on March 17, 1925, died on September 18, 2015.
Tomasso graduated from New Britain Senior High School in 1943. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy later that year and served as a radio operator on LST 925. His service took him to the Russell Islands, New Guinea, Lingayen Gulf, Luzon, and other locations in the Pacific Ocean.
Tomasso’s boat exploded after Japanese service members put explosives in the engine’s water intake tubes. Tomasso survived the event and received a Purple Heart. His LST was towed back to Hawaii. Tomasso was able to repair the radio during the return trip. Upon returning to the United States, Tomasso chose to attend officer’s training in Auburn, Alabama where he met his future wife, Joy.

George Cartsounis, born November 26, 1926, died at his home in Stamford, Connecticut on August 18, 2015. Cartsounis enlisted in the U.S. Navy in December of 1943. After completing boot camp in Sampson, NY, Cartsounis boarded his ship, the USS Staff, at Norfolk, VA. Cartsounis spent his service sweeping for mines in the Atlantic Ocean. He had some close calls with torpedoes, one of which was 25’ from his ship. Cartsounis was also present for the Invasion of Normandy. He was later sent to the Pacific Ocean where he served in Okinawa’s mine infested waters. He earned two Bronze Stars for his service in the Atlantic and two Bronze Stars for his service in the Pacific. After the war, Cartsounis spent a month in England before returning home to the United States.

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IN MEMORIAM

Sam Spigelman, born February 9, 1923, died on October 11, 2013 at his home. Spigelman enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps and served with the 409th fighter group 512th squadron, where he supported ground troops. His trip across the Atlantic took 11 days, during which he experienced German submarines and Atlantic storms. His service took him to the Invasion of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and all across Europe. Spigelman had a few close calls while in London, avoiding the London bombings. He achieved the rank of staff sergeant. His outfit was awarded five presidential citations.

Dale A. Barsness, born April 27, 1935, died on August 8, 2015. Barsness served with the U.S. Air Force Research and Development Center at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, as well as Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio. Growing up in North Dakota, he saw many planes fly overhead, which inspired him to join the Air Force. Dale was not recalled during the Berlin Airlift because he was working in the USAF Materials and Lubricants lab. His polymers were used to seal NASA rockets as they went into space. His favorite achievement was helping to design the “moon boot” that was used during the first moon walk.

Joseph Braun died in his home on August 21, 2015 at the age of 96. Braun served in the Air Force with the 345th bombardment group during World War II. Braun lost his oldest son, Paul J. Braun, in Vietnam in 1967. He is also predeceased by his wife. He is remembered by his two children and two grandchildren.

Steven J. Cavallari, born on December 17, 1918, died on June 4, 2015. Cavallari was drafted in May 1942 and went to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. After his training in the United States, Cavallari went abroad to Australia, New Guinea, and the Philippines with the 360th Air Service squadron. Cavallari was infected with Malaria while in Oceania. Cavallari helped to secure Clark Air Field in the Philippines and repaired American planes until the war was over.

Abraham S. Homar was born September 2, 1919 and passed away on December 6, 2014. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He was sent to England where he was assigned to the 323rd bomb squadron. He fought the Luftwaffe across the English Channel. On February 22, 1944 Homar’s plane was hit by flak. As his plane went down, Homar was able to evacuate and parachute out over German territory. He was captured and sent to Stalag VI, in present day Lithuania. Homar marched in the 86 day long Black March to Stalag XI-B. After being liberated from the POW camp, he returned home to his family who thought he was lost in the war.

Mario Portera, born May 4, 1928, passed away on November 7, 2014. Portera, along with 6 of his brothers, was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II. He served in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany. He volunteered to be a driver, although, as a native Brooklynite, he had never driven before. He learned quickly and was in charge of the motor pool. Portera learned to drive 6x6s, weapon carriers, and tractor trailers. He also became a mail orderly, a job he enjoyed. Portera spent his down time playing cards, playing baseball, and rolling dice. He achieved the rank of T-5.
Theodore (Ted) R. Cummings passed away on September 21, 2015. He was born on December 17, 1923 and proceeded to live a life of service. Ted was interviewed by the Veterans History Project in August 2010. The following is a small portion of what he shared with us in our conversation. Ted enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps when he was 17 and trained as an Infantryman at Parris Island, South Carolina. He joined the Marines because he did not want to be outdone by his brother who was already in the Marine Corps. His military service took him to many areas around the world, including Australia, New Zealand, Tulagi, Southern Solomon Islands, Cape Gloucester, New Britain Island, and Milne Bay, New Guinea. He took part in numerous battles, such as Tulagi, Cape Gloucester, and Guadalcanal. Some battles were brief but most lasted days. At the time of the attack on Cape Gloucester Ted’s unit, one of the “Old Breed” (nickname for historic 1st Marine Division), was under the command of Douglas MacArthur. Ted shared a story about a mortar attack that started while he had his weapon broken down for cleaning. The mortar came suddenly, and he had to run into a ditch and put his weapon back together from memory.

Ted became deathly sick with scrub typhus while he was at Cape Gloucester and was told he was going to be sent home. Ted refused to leave his fellow marines and was allowed to return to his unit after recovering from his illness. This event sums up Ted’s character and his dedication to others, both throughout his short military career and beyond. Ted went on to serve in the Marines until shortly after “VJ Day.”

When Ted returned home to Manchester, CT he became engaged in his community, serving with the town board of directors, the school board, and as a state representative. Ted was an advocate for people struggling with alcohol and drug abuse problems. Ted was nominated and inducted into the Connecticut Veterans Hall of Fame in 2014. He was a humble man and an extraordinary human being, always learning new things and tirelessly helping others.

You can see his interview, photos and personal documents on the VHP website at: www.ccsu.edu/vhp.

CCSU is hosting a viewing of the six episode PBS documentary series titled “Latino Americans: 500 Years of History.” The public is encouraged to attend the viewing of the episode “War and Peace,” which will focus on Latino Americans who have served in the U.S. military. The viewing will be held in Welte Auditorium at the CCSU Campus, December 10, 2015. A 5:30 reception in the lobby of the theater will precede the 6:00 pm viewing. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion with Latino veterans. You can learn more about these viewings on Facebook at: www.facebook.com/ccsulatinoamericans.
NEW STUDENT WORKER

In August 2015, Zachary Keith joined the Veterans History Project. In May 2015, he graduated from the University of Connecticut with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History/Urban Studies. He is currently working on his Masters in Public History at Central Connecticut State University. He enjoys being a part of VHP “because oral histories provide a side of history not normally given.” In his free time he enjoys working on his family history.

Honor Our Heroes this Veterans Day.

NEW STUDENT WORKER

On February 9, 2010, the CCSU Veterans History Project created a YouTube account to allow public viewing of our veterans’ interviews. We have continued to post the veteran interviews to YouTube regularly since that date. The following statistics show the amazing reach of the VHP.

* As of October 2015, the CCSU VHP had a total of 844 videos uploaded to YouTube with 404,806 views of those videos.
* Total minutes watched is over 1,950,462, which equates to 32,507 hours, or 1,354.48 days, or over 3.7 years of watching VHP videos.
* VHP YouTube videos have been viewed by people in 202 different countries. The U.S. accounts for 64% of the views, with the UK and Canada comprise another 12.1%.
* 86% of viewers are male and 14% female.
* 1,800 likes and over 850 comments posted
* Average view duration is over 10 minutes.
* Past 30 days: 5,513 views totaling 82,394 minutes

Thanks to Connecticut veterans for sharing their experiences with the world!

VHP STATS

By Buckley Morgan II

NEW STUDENT WORKER

Joseph L. Giasullo began working at the Veterans History Project in May 2015. Joseph is a senior at CCSU working on a BA in English and a minor in creative nonfiction writing. As a veteran of OIF/OEF, Joseph focuses his writing on exploring the military experience and how such writing can be helpful to the well-being of all soldiers. He believes, “Veterans are a very delicate and passionate community. They can prove that through their stories. They just have to learn how to tell them, and we, as American citizens, must learn how to read them.”

For more information or to participate please contact:

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