

The NEW YORK Sun

December 13, 2007 Edition > Section: [Arts and Letters](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

Vietnam's Legacy Heard in Brooklyn Museums

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December 13, 2007

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/68012>

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The night before John Hamill was to leave for Vietnam in 1967, his older brother, Pete, offered him \$3,000 in cash not to go. "It was the biggest roll of cash I'd ever seen — probably about a year's pay in the army," John recalled recently. "But the ship had sailed in my head." The war "was the biggest thing that was happening nationally and internationally, and not to be part of that seemed impossible."

John Hamill came back from Vietnam in 1968, became a journalist, like his brothers Pete and Dennis, and is now the director of communications for Brooklyn College and the City University of New York. His story is included in an exhibition opening tomorrow at the Brooklyn Historical Society, called "In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn's Vietnam Veterans." The exhibition, which is in the Society's new oral history gallery, will include 16 oral histories, life-size photographic portraits of nine of the veterans, and artifacts from their experiences of the war.

Since Deborah Schwartz became its president last year, the Historical Society has hired a full-time oral historian, and is currently pursuing projects on, among other subjects, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, jazz musicians in Brooklyn, and the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, the country's oldest community development corporation.

"This is something we think is a crucial part of our responsibility," Ms. Schwartz said of oral histories. "Since people less and less keep diaries or write letters, this is one of the ways we can capture their first-hand experience."

The Society is interested not just in collecting oral histories, but in finding creative ways to present them to the public. The vice president for exhibits and education, Kate Fermoile, said that, as far she knows, the Society is the first museum in the country to devote a gallery exclusively to oral histories.

The design for "In Our Own Words" was executed by Alison Cornyn, the founder of a company called Picture Projects that designs interactive installations for cultural institutions. Ms. Cornyn said that, when she visited the Historical Society, she was struck by the large number of historical portraits hanging on the walls. "I had this clear vision of presenting life-size portraits of some of the veterans, so you stand in front of them and you hear their story," Ms. Cornyn said.

Ms. Cornyn took photographs of nine of the veterans, in Brooklyn locations of their choosing. To connect the modern portraits to the historical ones, she printed the photographs on canvas, varnished them, and put them in gold frames.

A California company called American Technological Corporation donated nine "hypersonic" speakers, which deliver a very localized sound. When a visitor walks in front of one of the life-size portraits, the speaker turns on and plays the audio of the veteran's story.

"When you stand right underneath, it's like they're speaking in your head; it's very intimate," Ms. Cornyn said of the effect of the speakers. "But if you stand just to the left or right it's more muted." Visitors can also listen to stories on headsets at computers in the middle of the gallery. You can listen to a story straight through, or listen to sections of stories grouped by theme or period of the war.

The content of the exhibition is a collaboration between the Historical Society and a professor at Brooklyn College, Philip F. Napoli, who since 2003 has been doing oral histories of Vietnam veterans living in the five boroughs.

Mr. Napoli said his project is driven, in part, by a desire to overthrow the popular mythology of Vietnam veterans as violent and disturbed. Seventy percent of those who served in-country in Vietnam had volunteered, he noted, and many over their lives have remained committed to public service. "They found a way to heal themselves and reconnect with a society that really cast them aside when they returned," Mr. Napoli said.

One of the other men included in the exhibition, Tony Wallace, describes how, after the war, he tried to track down the families of three friends who had been killed, in an attack in which he himself was wounded. He wrote to President Nixon, asking for their full names and next of kin, and the Department of the Army provided him with two of the three names. He wrote to their families, and one of his friends' mothers wrote back, saying that she had prayed to hear from one of her son's friends. He visited the family, who were Italian, in Illinois and told them how much he and his friends had all enjoyed the pepperoni they sent their son in care packages.

Mr. Hamill grew up in South Brooklyn and volunteered for the Army at 17. He didn't agree with the war, but he believed in serving his country, and he wanted to see the world. As he says in his "Portrait": "I guess everybody wants to run away from home when they're 17 — and the circus wasn't in town." He became a medic in the 173rd Airborne Brigade.

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Although he later joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War, he never regretted serving. "It's the only important job I've ever had," he said. "All the others have been good jobs or bad jobs, but that's the only important one."

The oral history project and the exhibition are timely, Mr. Hamill said, because of the number of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I'm just hoping that emotionally and financially this country supports these new veterans a lot better than they did us," Mr. Hamill said. "These kids deserve the best, because they gave everything."

Over the next year, while "In Our Own Words" is up, the Historical Society will hold several open houses, where veterans can come and have their own stories recorded.

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