

## **The things they carried: Military Memorabilia Museum displays a treasure trove of war**

By LANCE SHEARER

Wednesday, November 16, 2011

Daily News Correspondent

The experiences of war live on in the hearts and memories of the men and women who fought, and, apparently, in their closets and garages as well. Thousands of artifacts, pieces of soldiers' gear and souvenirs from this country's wars, went on display Friday, Veterans Day, at the grand opening of the Museum of Military Memorabilia at the Naples airport passenger terminal. Helmets, uniforms, medals, pistols, rifles and machine guns joined scale model and full-sized military vehicles at the site.

Some of the artifacts are on permanent display, while some, including the Navy and Air Force warplanes parked on the tarmac outside the terminal, were just on hand for the day's events.

For anyone who has flown a commercial flight out of the airport, it was strange to walk out the gate and see, not commuter airliners, but vintage military aircraft. The warbirds harkened back to the birth of the Naples airfield 78 years ago, when it was a training facility for what was then the Army Air Corps, a branch of the Army, before the Air Force split off and became a separate branch of the armed forces.

Military trainer aircraft, including two Navy T-38 Trojans, shared space with vintage Willys Jeeps from the 1940s and '50s, along with a Sherman tank on loan from the Collier County Museum. The day's events included a flyby by four current Air Force F-16 fighter jets.

Baggage claim no longer operates, but the car rental counters were staffed and open for business, in the midst of the displays. An estimated 1,500 to 2,000 visitors ranged over the site, from young boys entranced by the motorized tank models, to grizzled veterans whose personal memories were triggered by a particular item.

"The one that gets me the most is the B-29," said Fred Reese. "I flew those out of Yakoda Air Force Base in Japan, doing nuclear measurements. When the Chinese tested their nukes, we'd fly downwind and get samples of the material, to analyze it and find out what was in the bomb."

The B-29, a four-engine bomber, was the largest warplane of World War II. The model at the museum, part of the permanent display, is a replica of "Enola Gay," the plane

that dropped the first atomic weapon on Japan. The plane, an accompanying book, and a replica of "Little Boy," the bomb itself, are all signed by Col. Paul Tibbets, the pilot, as well as other crew members.

Eight-year-old James Clark looked innocent, even angelic, strolling through the displays, despite wearing camouflage fatigues.

"My brother's in Afghanistan," he said, as he stopped to view a glass case full of light machine guns.

Many of the artifacts on display come from the personal collection of Museum president Bob McDonald, who has been collecting military memorabilia for 50 years. Others, including a 1942 Jeep, belong to vice president Greg Garcia. But many have come out of closets and storage spaces, where they have sat for decades.

"People box up their mementos, and they sit in those boxes for 50 or 60 years," said Garcia. "It's amazing what they bring in."

One cache of notes from Pfc. John Canfield was found to include a poem he wrote on the battlefield, talking of meeting God. More items were being donated to the museum even after the opening on Friday, he said.

The permanent display at the MMM, housed in space provided by the Naples Airport Authority, focuses on World War II aviation, in commemoration of the origins of the airfield. In addition to the Enola Gay, models of planes including the Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, the Douglas P-47 Thunderbolt, and the Navy F6F Hellcat and PB4Y Catalina are on display, along with photos, flight suits, and a life-sized diorama showing ground troops fighting off an attack by Japanese Zeroes. A yellowing front page from the December 8, 1941, New York Daily News screams "Japs Bomb Hawaii."

The museum is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. There is no charge for admission. Anyone who would like to learn more about or contribute to the work of the museum, a nonprofit organization, can contact Greg Garcia at (239) 682-0461, or send donations to the Museum of Military Memorabilia, PO Box 112800, Naples, FL 34108.



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online