

Veterans' stories move from shadows to spotlight at History Center event

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The reception Robin O'Brien received coming home from Vietnam in 1967 is like a scar that never fully fades away.

Like it was yesterday, O'Brien recalls being the target of verbal abuse and obscene gestures, even being almost run off a Northern California road by a motorist shaking his fist at the uniformed Army captain who earned a Bronze Star serving in the 219th Aviation Battalion.



the Pledge of Allegiance during the dedication of the newly expanded Veterans Park at the Atlanta History Center on Memorial Day. A main attraction of the park is Veterans History Project interviews recorded at the History Center that visitors can access by scanning a code on interactive information panels with their smartphones and tablets. A window opens on their screens showing three-minute excerpts.

"It was a big disappointment because I was really not anxious to go over there and get shot at, but I did, I paid my dues," said O'Brien, now a Sandy Springs resident. "There were a lot of men who got killed over there, and their families got telegrams."

But O'Brien, who also served as a Korean War medic, will receive belated appreciation on Veterans Day during an Atlanta History Center program, "Stories of Sacrifice: Listening to America's Veterans." Sponsored by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and hosted by AJC editor Kevin Riley, the event will feature firsthand recorded accounts from the History Center's Veterans History Project as well as StoryCorps' Military Voices Initiative.

"Kinda nice, I guess," O'Brien said about being one of more than 10 veterans who will have videotaped excerpts shown on Monday night.

During the dedication of the newly expanded Veterans Park at the Atlanta History Center on Memorial Day, Sgt. 1st Class Justin

"I'm a guy who likes to stand in the shadows," added the 75-year-old retired Delta pilot, who plans to attend "Stories" with his wife, Julia, and three of his children. "But if it helps other people bring some recognition to the men and women who serve in the military, I'm honored to do it."

The Veterans History Project is the History Center's effort to bring more stories of sacrifice and valor from the shadows.



During the dedication of the newly expanded Veterans Park at the Atlanta History Center on Memorial Day, Sgt. 1st Class Justin Brooks distributed soils onto the grounds from a helmet worn by Stanley Lester, 1st Infantry Division, at Omaha Beach on D-Day. Park visitors can scan a code on interactive information panels with their smartphones and tablets, and a window opens on their screens showing three-minute excerpts from Veterans History Project interviews recorded at the History Center.

As a founding partner of this nationwide initiative of the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center, the History Center since 2003 has contributed more than 450 interviews of American war veterans, from World War II up to the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts (as well as of civilians who were actively involved in supporting war efforts).



Robin O'Brien, a veteran of the Korean and Vietnam wars, is one of the veterans whose stories will be told on Monday evening at the Atlanta History Center event "Stories of Sacrifice: Listening to America's Veterans."

Veterans History Project partners send the full recordings and transcripts of the professionally conducted interviews to the Library of Congress, and copies also are saved at the originating institution and provided to each veteran participant. (By contrast, StoryCorps' Military Voices Initiative typically is a more casual conversation between a veteran and a hand-picked "interview partner." StoryCorps is an independent, decade-old national collector of oral histories about an unlimited array of topics.)

The push of the Veterans History Project is to use these personal reflections to teach about our country's military history.

With that mission, the History Center is taking an increasingly active role in spreading the veteran stories it has collected.

On Memorial Day, it dedicated its expanded Veterans Park, at the intersection of West Paces Ferry Road and Slaton Drive. Park visitors can scan a code on interactive information panels with their smartphones and tablets, and a window opens on their screens showing three-minute excerpts from

the Veterans History Project interviews plus additional information about each veteran.

It's certain to be a popular stop on Veterans Day, including in the morning when the park hosts a wreath-laying program open to the public. (See accompanying box for details.)

In another development that will make the veterans' stories more accessible, the History Center recently announced that its James G. Kenan Research Center, through a gift from the Scott Hudgens Family Foundation, will make more than 600 hours of stories available for free online. The interviews are expected to be available on the Web by late 2014.

"Before their voices fade, it is important to record and preserve veterans' stories, creating powerful tools to educate future generations," History Center President and CEO Sheffield Hale said.

Yet Tony Hilliard, a volunteer who has conducted most of the History Center's interviews along with fellow veteran Joe Bruckner, said it was easier to secure participants in the Atlanta project's early days. Interest was on high then due to Tom Brokaw's string of "The Greatest Generation" books and the opening of the National World War II Memorial in Washington.

Lately, Hilliard and Bruckner have had some months where they have conducted only a single interview.

"We've got a lot of letters or emails out there right now to veterans who have indicated interest, but they don't follow through," Hilliard said. "People just get busy living their lives."

Hilliard said the experience can be cathartic for the veterans, even though “none are John Wayne-type interviews” focusing on blood and guts, and that they frequently spark conversations with loved ones who’ve never heard some of the stories.

Max Torrence, a leader of the Atlanta Vietnam Veterans Business Association, said there is no time like the present for veterans to save their memories for posterity.

“We have heroes walking among us that we need to know about,” said Torrence, who noted that even Vietnam veterans are reaching an age where it’s important to secure their memories.

In fact, he spoke about the matter by cellphone as he drove to St. Joseph’s Hospital to visit a fellow Vietnam veteran who is fighting cancer of the lymph nodes, believed related to Agent Orange exposure.

“You never know,” Torrence said. “When it’s your time to go, you hope that you’ve told your story.”