



A New Exhibit At the Brooklyn Historical Society: Sons of Brooklyn in Vietnam

By Bob Hopkins
May/June 2008

“I feel like Lady Macbeth. I’m never going to get the blood of Vietnam off my hands.”

—Joan Furey, U.S. Army Nurse, Vietnam, 1969 “What do you think they’ll axe me?”

Ernie Diorio was a little nervous. There was no mistaking where he’d been born and bred. His Brooklynese was a dead giveaway. Although he’d moved to Jersey many years ago, he retained the uniqueness that identified him as a son of Bushwick, then Fort Greene.

Diorio, accompanied by Paul Bausch and myself, was driving to the Brooklyn Historical Society on a crisp late February morning to look at—and in Diorio’s case, participate in—*In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn’s Vietnam Veterans*, the premiere exhibit of the new Oral History Gallery.

The project is a collaboration between Phil Napoli, an assistant professor of U.S. social and public history at Brooklyn College, and the Brooklyn Historical Society. A meeting in 2006 between Napoli and Deborah Schwartz, the president of the Society, led to brainstorming sessions that culminated in the exhibit.

According to Kate Fermoile, the vice president for Exhibitions and Education, Schwartz was involved in leading a drive to establish oral histories as the centerpiece of exhibitions, rather than ancillary to clips, artifacts, and written explanations that marked most presentations around the country. The oral histories—in this case of Brooklynites who served during the Vietnam War—were to be the focus of the exhibition. Napoli was a perfect fit, with his background in oral history projects, including hundreds of hours of recorded interviews with Vietnam veterans for a book he was working on. Napoli had a professional interest in Vietnam veterans, and he felt a personal attachment as the son of a man who witnessed the bombing of his home town of Naples, Italy, during World War II.

The Brooklyn Historical Society is located at 128 Pierrepont Street in a four-story Queen Anne style building completed in 1881. As we entered the building, the rich ornamentation and the life-sized oil portraits of famous Brooklyn residents struck me. As I ascended the staircase past

Commodore Thomas Truxton, Philip Livingston, Hosea Webster, and William Cullen Bryant, I suddenly found myself standing before a gold-framed portrait of John and Dennis Hamill. I had just experienced a seamless flow into the exhibition, the result of planning by the Society's Alison Cornyn. The portraits are printed on canvas, giving them a painterly sense.

Before each of the nine photographic portraits is a pad that you step on to activate a state-of-the-art sound system. As you listen to the 3-5 minute presentations, told in the veterans' own words, you become intimate with the people in the portraits.

Having served in Vietnam, my experience forged a visceral connection with each subject. Their commonality lies in their ties to Brooklyn and their service. Although they come from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, the thread of their lives is intertwined in their upbringing and service.

Each portrait conveys a part of the personality of the subject, from the free-spirit surfboard behind Joe Giannini, to the spirituality of stained glass windows over the shoulder of Anthony Wallace, and the activism of Herbert Sweet symbolized by the Black Veterans for Social Justice insignia he wears. John and Dennis Hamill appear together, although Dennis didn't serve. His statement at the beginning of the oral history, "I wasn't sure I'd ever see him again. And it was like this amazing emptiness that I never felt that way before," brings home the tightness of an Irish family from Park Slope. You instinctively know why John Hamill wanted his younger brother with him in the portrait.

Adjacent to each portrait is a glass-enclosed stand with personal artifacts: medals, letters home, a can of foot powder, pictures of men striking macho poses. And there are unit insignias, olive drab in keeping with the uniform of the day. Under the memorabilia is a printed version of the oral presentation and a bio of each person.

These simply add to the oral histories.

As I studied the portrait of Joan Furey and listened to her presentation, I was struck by the strength of this woman and by a deep sense of loss that both of us had experienced. Although I only met Joan once and talked to her briefly, we had a common friend, Lynda Van Devanter. Lynda had served as a nurse in Vietnam and wrote *Home Before Morning*. She died in 2002.

Although we only saw each other on occasion, we had forged a bond in the early days of VVA. She had schooled me in women veteran issues. She said I was lucky to be able to go to The Wall and look up the names of men I knew who had died in Nam.

She told me many men had died on her watch and she didn't know any of their names. Furey's recounting of the perils of personal attachment, as a nurse in a mass casualty unit, brought this all back to me.

Away from the portraits is a kiosk that has expanded stories on the nine veterans featured in the exhibit and additional stories of other Brooklyn veterans. To listen to all of the histories takes about four hours, but it's well worth it.

In addition to the oral history section, there is a reading room on a separate floor that has a display of photographs from—and after—the Vietnam War. The photos by Bernie Edelman, Leroy Henderson, and Tony Velez are compelling. These black-and-whites exude a sense of pathos. They are representative of the men who took them and their involvement in Vietnam and its aftermath. Other photos will be rotated in during the year that the exhibit is scheduled to run.

Also in the reading room are books related to the Vietnam War and a computer. Visitors are invited to contribute their own stories, which will be added to the project archives.

After our visit, Diorio was interviewed for two hours as part of the oral history project. He is typical of most Brooklyn residents who identify themselves by borough neighborhood. Canarsie, Park Slope, Flatbush, Williamsburg, Bedford-Stuyvesant (Bed-Stuy), and Fort Greene are all parts of the lexicon and folklore of Brooklyn.

Diorio was an only child, born in his parent's home on Vanderbilt Avenue and delivered by a midwife. He moved from Canarsie to Brownsville, and then to Bushwick before ending up in Fort Greene. He described his childhood in mixed ethnic and racial neighborhoods as uneventful but happy. He identified with the Brooklyn Dodgers and was devastated when they left in 1958. He couldn't support the Yankees because they were American League and therefore to be hated, so "we were left with no team till the Mets came." He talked about the food, smells, sounds, and friendships of his neighborhood.

Drafted initially in 1966, Diorio quit his job and was given a party before reporting, but was promptly rejected for service, temporarily, for high blood pressure. "The next time I had to report in 1967, they didn't give me a party. I reported Thanksgiving Day. That holiday still brings back bad memories."

Diorio was assigned to 1/5 Bobcats of the 25th Infantry Division. He saw a lot of action, including the Tet Offensive, and was wounded but remained in the field. After the war, he returned home, went back to work, married, and had three children. He moved to New Jersey so that his children would have more room to grow up in. He put the war behind him, or so he thought. "After 30 years, I realized I needed help. I'm getting that now," Diorio said.

Although you won't hear Ernie Diorio's full story at the exhibit, you can hear and see parts of it in the voices of featured speakers.

As we left for home, we made stops at Junior's for cheesecake and the House of Calzones in Red Hook for their famous fried calzones. As we waited for our order, I realized that the exhibit had

captured a sense of what it was like to be from Brooklyn and to have served during the Vietnam War.

Oral histories were the centerpiece of the exhibit, and the veterans had the final say on what was in each of their stories. This trust made the exhibit a success. The lack of a political agenda and the care taken to balance the speakers and exhibits allows each person to form his or her own view on the war and its aftermath. Ω

Bob Hopkins lives in West Allenhurst, New Jersey. He served with Charlie Battery, 3/13th Artillery, 25th Infantry Division in Vietnam. A long-time member of VVA Oakhurst Chapter 12, Hopkins was one of only two New Jersey delegates to attend VVA's Founding Convention. Philip Napoli is an associate member of VVA Brooklyn Chapter 72.