The New York Times
nytimes.com

December 14, 2007

Stories of Vietnam Veterans, Aloud

By MICHAEL WILSON

The line between an exhibit and who comes to see it blurred on Thursday in the man with the blue pinstripe suit standing quietly in the Brooklyn Historical Society. The Purple Heart they gave him is in a glass case, and he cherishes it, but he carries a lot more metal than that in his 59-year-old back and hands. Part man, part artifact.

He listened to a recording of his own voice. “My name is Tony Wallace and I was born and raised in Brooklyn,” it began. Then it went on to recall his efforts to find the families of the three Army soldiers who were not as lucky as he was on April 15, 1970, when an enemy shell exploded outside the opening to their bunker in Vietnam.

“The summer of 1970, I wrote President Nixon and told him who I was — gave him my name, my rank, and said I was in Vietnam, such and such a time, Point A to Point B, and then wounded on this day — in other words, trying to give them enough credence to know that, hey, I’m no — you know — phony.”

Mr. Wallace’s journey away from agonies both physical and psychological, from the self-described “black mummy” wrapped in bandages after the shelling to the man in the suit, is part of “In Our Own Words: Portraits of Brooklyn’s Vietnam Veterans,” an audio exhibition opening on Friday at the Historical Society in Brooklyn Heights.

Visitors may listen to recorded stories from Vietnam veterans in a state-of-the-art installation: life-size, head-to-toe portraits of nine veterans line the walls of two rooms, with a spot on the floor in front of each one.

Standing on the spot prompts an ultrasonic speaker, dangling a few feet overhead, that uses directional sound technology. Suddenly, the visitor hears the veteran’s voice as if that person were standing right there, while just a few feet away, the voice is almost inaudible, or sounds like a whisper. Several speakers may be playing at the same time, with no overlap or distraction.

The effect is remarkably intimate. Visitors listen to deeply personal stories while facing the portrait of the veteran telling the story and a case displaying medals, letters home and snapshots from Vietnam. The recordings are of stories that are poignant and funny, haunting and dark.

The exhibition, which will be open for one year, evolved from the work of Philip F. Napoli, an assistant professor of history at Brooklyn College, who has recorded interviews with more than 100 veterans.

Mr. Wallace, who lives in Flatbush and works for Con Edison, spoke in his recording of finding the families of two of the three men with him in the bunker that day. At the moment the shell exploded, Mr. Wallace was gathering ammunition and had his back turned, a position that saved his life, as the other three men took the force of the explosion straight in their chests. Mr. Wallace's back was shredded from neck to ankle, and he was later told that he would have died were it not for the speed of the soldiers who found him and got him on a helicopter.

Nurses held his hand and changed his dressings three times a day in hospitals in Vietnam, Japan and, finally, St. Albans, Queens. To this day, he carries pieces of shrapnel, debris and even twigs under his scarred skin. When Mr. Wallace returned to Brooklyn, he was tormented by survivors' guilt. It was then that he wrote letters to the families of the dead soldiers.

"One day I get a letter from Aurora, Illinois, and I open the letter and it said, 'I prayed to God for somebody like you,'" he said in his recording. "And that was Bill DeSantis's mother. I called her, as soon as I finished reading the letter, and she said to me again, 'I prayed to God for somebody like you.' She says, 'I have to ask you; did my son suffer when he died?' And I asked her, 'Well what did the Army tell you?' And she replied, 'They indicated he was on a bunker that took a direct hit.' And I said to her, 'That's exactly what happened, and there's no way Bill suffered; it was too fast.' And she said, 'Thank you.'"

He would later visit the DeSantis family in Illinois and go fishing with his comrade's father. "We talked about his son, and I told him about when you guys would send care packages, you'd send the pepperoni, and how Bill shared that with us."

As he listened to the recording on Thursday, Mr. Wallace smiled.

In the next room, visitors hear a disturbing story told by Ed German, 57, of Riverhead, N.Y., a jazz D.J. and portrait artist, about a marine whose nickname was Teeth. But the recording ends on a sunnier note, as Mr. German recalls his return to Brooklyn with another friend, a marine named Mickey.

"I had to beg Mickey to put his uniform on to go home," he said. "Back then people didn't wear their uniforms anymore. When they got home, it wasn't the thing to do. Yolanda," Mr. German's girlfriend, he said, "was getting ready to graduate high school, and I remember, she said to me, 'Eddie, if you come to the graduation, please don't wear your uniform.'

"So I had to beg Mickey to put on his uniform, but he said, 'All right, all right, I'll put it on.' So, you know, we were proud, we put on our uniforms, we got on the train, we had all of our Vietnam medals and my Purple Heart. And we got off the train and we turned the corner of Putnam Avenue and we walked down our block, and I felt so proud."