

field kitchen is eclipsed by a C-rations display. Dick Thompson says, "To heat them, you'd put them on the engine block and heat them there. Or, if you had access to C-4, you'd just slice off a bit, roll it up into a ball and light it and it burns like Sterno." A vet comments, "You always knew the young kids that had never cooked on a fire before because you'd see them explode the spaghetti and meat balls."

Thompson points out a half pack of

There's more, besides the "Huey" with the real bullet holes: a Jeep mounted with a 106 recoilless rifle, an armored personnel carrier converted into a mobile mortar platform, numerous trucks and other vehicles. There are even separate Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army displays, that Craig LaMountain has brought back from a half dozen trips to Southeast Asia.

Thompson points to the Ho Chi Minh sandals made from old truck tires. "They used everything and anything that they could." It's surprising how much damage these guys could do with a Chinese-made bolt action rifle and some Punji sticks. And yes, the museum has those too.

There's even a flower-painted VW "Love Bug" outside. "It's part of the Vietnam era, and we want to show the students, when they come here, both sides of the story; between the hippies and the protesters and the people who were drafted," shrugs LaMountain.

With his Memorial Day winding down, he and other vets and volunteers relax with a beer and trade war stories. "I've had veterans in here today not afraid to talk to their families," says LaMountain wearily. "The kid was 30 years old, the son. He said his father had never opened up about Vietnam until

today. That experience just made my day."

Dick Thompson chimes in, "One woman said, 'I learned more about my husband today than I have in 40 years of marriage.'"

"Nobody ever does a story on the wives," comments another. "The wives



Above, researched and painted by Piedmont Virginia Community College students, a VW Love Bug represents the other side of the Vietnam War. Below, this past Memorial Day, Dick Thompson and Craig LaMountain (white shirt) swapped stories and reminisced with other Vietnam vets.



now, with these guys going to Iraq four, five, six tours; I don't know how they have a family. They're gone more than they're home. I went twice and it was hard enough on my family," continues Thompson.

Asked what advice they, as Vietnam vets, would give today's soldiers coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. "Get with your family and settle down," they say. "Family is the only

thing you've got."

"Get screening for post traumatic stress disorder," says the bomber pilot. "Come to an organization like this where you have like people that have been there, done that, and talk about it."

The Vietnam War Foundation Museum is free and open by appointment. For more information, contact them at www.vietnamwarfoundation.org.



Dick Thompson of Gordonsville logged 400 combat hours in Vietnam in a helicopter just like the one pictured at left. Below, Thompson flew fixed and rotary wing aircraft during his two tours in Vietnam, earning 23 air medals and logging a total of 700 combat hours.

THE CHOPPER PILOT

"It's interesting to hear fire going by, and what you like to do is hear it, 'cause that means you're not dead."

Dick Thompson, of Gordonsville, is standing next to a helicopter that saw extensive action in Vietnam. It's Memorial Day, and he's remembering. "It's a snap, like breaking a stick, that noise," he says of the unforgettable sound of being shot at. Whether it's a whine, a buzz or a snap, no vet ever forgets that sound.

He runs his hands over the fuselage of the Vietnam-era workhorse, the Bell UH-1 "Huey" his fingers tracing the bullet hole patches. "This one is just like a band-aid," he points to a 1-1/2" by 3" rectangle. "We'd even fly these things with tape over them." He points to the rotor blade. "As long as you didn't destroy the front leading edge, which is the spar, you could fly 'em with tape over 'em, and we did. And they'd whistle at you and the tape would whap at you, but you could get 'em home." He pauses a moment, eyes creasing in mirth. "You know being a pilot, I was very lazy. I wanted to always go home. I didn't sign up for living in the mud."

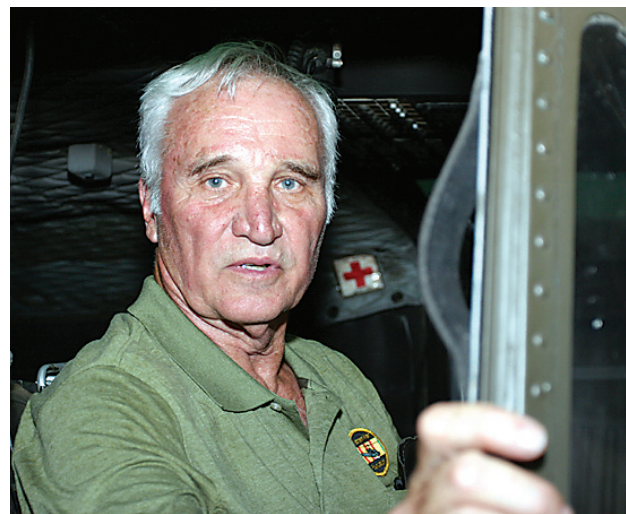
Then Dick Thompson's expression changes to something faraway and more



The VWF museum in Ruckersville also shows typical equipment used by the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army. Particularly enterprising were the Vietcong. Note the flare that has been converted into a lamp and the "Ho Chi Minh" sandals in front of it.

Winstons, standard issue. "Cigarettes: you wouldn't see that anymore." Then he notices a tiny roll of white tissue paper, "the most important thing in there; toilet paper, and that ain't very much," he grimaces. No wonder the GIs stuck extra smokes and TP in their helmet bands.

serious. For a moment there, he's half a world and 45 years away, hovering over a rice paddy in Southeast Asia, kicking seven armed men out the door. "You could put a squad in there," he points to the cramped open space in the middle of the chopper between the pilot and the door gunner. "The doors are open. You don't touch down. You come into a hover and they're out and you're gone. It's fast. When you're coming in for an evac, medical, they're throwing bodies in just as fast they can, just as many as they can, and they're bleeding everywhere." He points to the service record for this particular aircraft. "They had to replace some of the paneling underneath because of corrosion from the blood. It would get under the floor boards."



Dick Thompson signed up for two years in the military and wound up spending 20. He retired to Gordonsville in 1999.

This terrifying trip down memory lane is happening at the Vietnam War Foundation (VWF) museum near Ruckersville. This past Memorial Day as many as 500 vets and their families came through this jaw-dropping exhibit on the war that America chose to forget. As far as anyone knows, this non-profit foundation and museum is the only one of its kind in the nation.

That is remarkable when you consider that 58,159 American lives were lost in this conflict that never really had an official beginning or end. It started with the insertion of "advisors," sometime in the late 1950s. It ended almost 20 years later with the image of a helicopter lifting away from the outstretched arms of the abandoned South Vietnamese huddled on the roof of the U.S. Embassy. And while we memorialize dates and events such as Pearl Harbor and the Normandy invasion, we remember little of Vietnam. But thanks to people like Dick Thompson and, in particular, Craig LaMountain who put this outstanding collection together, that's going to change.

The "Huey," of course, is the biggest thing here in this oversized

garage in LaMountain's back yard. And well it should be, because Vietnam is where the helicopter really came into its own. "These things are hard to fly," says Thompson who

baby. He'd live with it; sleep with it; it was his responsibility, all the maintenance...There are so many places that things could go wrong, you had to trust that crew chief."

Thompson flew what was known as a "slick," meaning "no armament except for your protection from your door gunner. No mini gun, no rockets, things like that."

On a mission, the crew chief manned one of the door guns, "and then you'd get a recycled infantry guy for your door gunner on your other side. He's getting out of the mud. 'I'll volunteer to stay another year if I can be a door gunner on a Huey,'" they would say.

That business about volunteering all the time will get you in trouble. Dick Thompson signed up for two years after earning a civil engineering degree from Bucknell, and

"ended up 20 years in the military." He shakes his head in mock amazement. "I went in for two and spent 20. I can't count very well." It's just that he couldn't resist the lure that they were going to teach him how to fly. "And that was the downfall," which, for a pilot, is an interesting choice of words.

His first tour in Vietnam was as a fixed-wing pilot, flying "anything that

the Army had....So I went to Vietnam the first year, flew fixed-wing aircraft, intelligence-type stuff and flew about 1,200 hours...We worked our butts off." And then they put what's called a "stop loss" on all pilots. In other words, pilots were so valuable they wouldn't let them out of the service.

He came home, and they sent him to helicopter school instead. He r e m e m b e r s lamenting, "'Oh man, if I go to helicopter school I'm going right back.' And they said, 'Yup.' So I was 14 months door-to-door coming home to going back." He nonchalantly adds, "I did over 450 combat missions in the two years, both fixed-wing and rotary wing...If you're in country, it's all combat, because they're going to shoot at you as soon as you lift off the ground. A lot of them would lay at the end of the runway."

Vietnam-era helicopter pilots quickly and deservedly earned reputations as the best in the world. "I've got 700 hours combat time. So, you grow up fast in combat," confirms Dick, adding that of all U.S. fatalities in the Vietnam War, "10 percent are helicopter crewmen." Think about that for a moment. "Ten percent of them; helicopter crew members: either door gunners, crew chiefs or pilots. That's a pretty high percentage."

Needless to say, Dick was not part of the 10 percent. "I feel pretty lucky that way." Nor

was he wounded. "No, no. I'm fast," he flashes a game-winning grin. "Slick. I was flying slicks," he says breezily.

All told, Dick Thompson earned 23 air medals. "Yeah, I spent a lot of time in a cockpit," he understates. After Vietnam, he earned his masters degree in aerospace engineering and



A jeep-mounted 106 recoilless rifle and a "Huey" helicopter in the background are just a few of the vehicles on display at the VWF.

landed a dream job in the Pentagon. "I spent the next five years as the logistics/maintenance engineer for the development of the Blackhawk, the Apache, and a lot of the small birds that you see in special ops...It was a great job. I was working with industry; I was working on new airplanes; I was using my engineering and my background and all my experience."

But all good things must come to an end. After 20 years in the military they kicked him upstairs, "and I said, 'Bye,' and I got out." Dick Thompson then became what he calls "a beltway bandit," working as a consultant. Then, he was offered a job in special ops, but he turned it down. "You get involved in it and you can disappear, literally, out of the service, off the map, promotions, family, everything...So, it's a good thing I didn't get into it. I still have a family, and I wouldn't if I had gotten into it."

At the time he was living in Manassas, which was being gobbled up by the DC sprawl. So, in 1999, he and his wife Barbara found 10 acres just outside of Gordonsville and they have called here home ever since. "We love it," he says adding he still travels once a month to the Pentagon. The rest of the time, he

volunteers for Rebuilding Together "and I volunteer here (VWF) because I can and I never could before. And this I totally enjoy."

Asked about the public's perception of Vietnam, Dick Thompson has noticed a change for the better. In the past, "everybody hated GIs in the Vietnam War; I mean literally spit at you, yelled at you, all that kind of stuff...Now, folks our age are at a point to change the image and to talk about it. And because of a volunteer army and people just talking about it, attitude has changed in the last five or 10 years."

Concerning today's Iraq and Afghanistan troops, Thompson continues, "They're so much smarter than we were. These guys are so well-trained and superbly equipped, much better equipped... I probably couldn't make it as a pilot anymore. It's a lot more complicated and a lot faster. And I look at it and I say, 'Wow, these guys are really well-trained...They're flying drones in Afghanistan and the pilot is in East Timbuktu out here in Illinois."

Lately, as a Vietnam vet, he's been pleasantly surprised. "People are saying 'thank you.' Now that really startles a Vietnam vet. Somebody comes up on the street and says 'thank you.' You're going, 'Whoa, what's that for?'

They say, 'for your service.'"

We served

"We served," a couple says softly this past Memorial Day as they brush past Dick Thompson at the Vietnam War Foundation (VWF) museum near Ruckersville.

Thompson acknowledges this quiet couple with a smile. "We've had a good day today; a lot of kids and a lot of vets." For the kids it has been an education, a look at warfare from an era before they were born. For the adult children of vets, it has been a unique insight into what their parent went through. For the vets themselves, it has been an intense journey down memory lane, some of it painful, some of it remedial.

They pause to leaf through the photo albums, saying "I was there," or "I remember that." They donate photos and memorabilia. "He was cleaning out a box somewhere and he says 'this is going to be thrown out probably,'" Thompson quotes one vet saying.

Another, a helicopter pilot, climbs up into the cockpit of the "Huey," dons his helmet, and sits there for a full 45 minutes, silently reminiscing. "When he left, he felt a lot better," says Thompson, who, as a helicopter pilot himself, uniquely understands what that man was going through.

Earlier in the day, a former Vietnam-era nurse walked in, visibly nervous and upset. "I spent about an hour and a half with her, and finally we got her talking," smiles Thompson. "You know, nurses saw hellacious stuff. I was a pilot, and yeah I got shot at and all that kind of stuff, but I made it through. The people she saw didn't make it through." By the time she left, "she's got a mission to set up a display for us, and she went out a different person."

Small miracles like this happened all day long this past Memorial Day. For many it was the first time they felt appreciated for their service to their country in America's forgotten war.

Flash back to the mid-1960s. Craig LaMountain was 19 years old and fresh out of high school when he was drafted. Within in six months he was in Vietnam. "After experiencing all that and coming back here and finding out they don't teach about it in school and losing my brother and never finding him, my cousin comes back 10 years later; he's eaten up with Agent Orange..." LaMountain lets the sentence dangle; then starts again. "After that I decided I just didn't want the Vietnam veteran to go and be unrecognized, to be afraid to talk about his experiences to his family."

LaMountain started collecting Vietnam-era memorabilia and military vehicles, fixing them up, and taking them to schools. Five years ago, he retired to this area and brought his collection

with him. Two years ago, Dick Thompson read that LaMountain had a "Huey." He got to thinking. "I've got stuff I could donate," he said as he figuratively rummaged through his old trunk in the attic.

They went to work, plowed through the paperwork, and created The Vietnam War Foundation, a

501(c)3 museum that very well may be the only one of its kind in the country. The problem is, as word of mouth spreads and more vets visit and donate, it will soon outgrow its current space. They need a bigger building.

As it is, the display is outstanding. It takes you through the entire Vietnam experience, from boot camp to discharge. Photos show wooden World War II-era barracks. "Actually those pictures were taken at Fort Pickett a month ago, and they haven't improved any. A month ago! Open latrines," exclaims Thompson.

A basic training camp bunk and trunk have been set up. There's a clunky mobile radio, and an Army base switchboard sprouting enough wires to keep even Lily Tomlin busy. A complete



Part of the exhibit at the Vietnam War Foundation's museum focuses on the daily life of a serviceman, such as a complete field kitchen from that era.



All of Dick Thompson's Vietnam-era memorabilia is now in a display case at the VWF museum. Because so many vets have donated things, the museum is looking for a larger space.