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Listening to the echoes of Vietnam

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Alison Cornyn/Picture Projects

Anthony Wallace, one of the Vietnam veterans captured in oral-history project.

Brooklyn and Vietnam will be forever connected. That's why I'll be at the Brooklyn Historical Society on Saturday for the opening of "In Our Own Words: Portraits of Vietnam Veterans."

Full disclosure: I'm not a Vietnam veteran, but I'm the only civilian who is part of this oral-history exhibit.

A little background.

In 2003, I wrote a column in this space about my brother John, who served as a medic in the 173rd Airborne in Vietnam. I was 16 and John was 17 when he joined the Army. He went away to basic training, jump school, medic training, and then came home to Brooklyn on a furlough. And then one gloomy November morning in 1967, I walked him to the subway. I hugged him goodbye, and then he went away to Vietnam.

Without my brother, who was my best friend, I short-circuited in the aftermath of the drug-addled Summer of Love. I received letters home from John imploring me to do whatever I had to do to stay out of that dirty war.

While he was in the Central Highlands during the Tet Offensive, I was back here, marching in peace protests in New York and Washington.

It was the longest year of my life. When Johnny came marching home just before Thanksgiving of 1968 with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart, it was the best day of my life. But nothing was ever again the same.

Not for me. Certainly not for John.

A war had detonated in their middle of our childhood and it's been ringing in our ears in the 40 years since.

After I wrote about those days in this space, a Brooklyn College history professor named Philip Napoli contacted me, asking if John and I would agree to sit for interviews for a book he doing about Vietnam veterans from Brooklyn. I explained I wasn't a vet. He said he would like to have at least one civilian perspective of how that war affected the young people of Brooklyn.

We did the interviews. Napoli did 200 more interviews with Vietnam vets, 100 of them from Brooklyn, compiling 500-odd hours, the most comprehensive oral history of that war in the city's history.

Napoli's book will be out next year. But out of his work arose this exhibit at the Brooklyn Historical Society, which will run a full year.

"In 2006, Roberta Matthews, our provost, was in contact with Brooklyn Historical Society about ways in which the two Brooklyn institutions could collaborate," says

Napoli. "The most natural connection was through the college's history department. So, my chair[man], David Troyansky, and Ted Burroughs, the coauthor of 'Gotham,' met with BHS' President Deborah Schwartz, and my project came up."

In December of last year, they formalized an agreement. Napoli enlisted eight Brooklyn College students who'd taken his oral history course to help with the exhibition. "They conducted 60 more interviews over the course of one semester," he says. "That's pretty significant. They worked their butts off and were a big part of this exhibition. Then, in conjunction with Kate Fermoile, BHS' vice president of exhibitions, and her terrific staff, we selected the nine main interviewees. We also selected three hours of recordings of over 100 Vietnam veterans, which will be available in a listening room."

Noted photographer Alison Cornyn, BHS' director of picture projects, took life-size digital portrait photos, printed on canvas, of the nine main interviewees, which will be stationed around the exhibit. Beside each photo will be an artifact case containing personal belongings, diaries, medals and other mementos of the war. On the 35-minute tour, when you step in front of each photo, it will trigger a three-to-five-minute recorded clip of that veteran's personal story, in his own words.

"We worked hard to present a fair representation of ethnicity and races," Napoli says. "The hardest thing to find was a woman willing to speak. There were only 7,500 U.S. nurses who served 'in country.' We finally found Joan Furey, an Army nurse who was born in Flatbush. I learned more from her two-and-a-half-hour interview than in any single interview I've ever done. I learned that the medical personnel, like your brother, had it far worse in Vietnam than anybody else."

I didn't know that. But then these Vietnam veterans don't usually whine about how hard they had it. Getting them to talk about the war at all is yet another battle.

"What I can tell you is that these interviews changed my life, and my perspective on life," Napoli says.

The same way the war changed the lives of my brother and me.

And the lives of everyone else represented in this exhibit. It will probably have the same effect on those who go to the Brooklyn Historical Society to look and listen to those who, with the exception of me, were over there.

For more information, call (718) 222-4111.

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