

‘Don’t Ever Forget Their Sacrifice’

RHS Exhibit, Community Program Explore Rockbridge And The Vietnam War



Editor’s note: This article was written by Eric Wilson, executive director of the Rockbridge Historical Society, and regional co-chair of the VA250: American Revolutions committee. Related profiles of local veterans will appear next month, tied to RHS’ Dec. 7 “Rockbridge & Vietnam” program, and Dec. 17 film screening.

A full half-century has now passed since the conventional American reckoning of “The End of the Vietnam War.” 2025 marks the semi-centennial anniversary of the fall of Saigon, although that stands as only one of many signal dates being broadly observed this year.

The last U.S. combat troops officially left South Vietnam on March 29, 1973, bearing the continued costs of more than a decade of service by American personnel, starting in the early 1960s. More iconically, the final, harried withdrawal from the country’s former capital has been imprinted into collective memory by images of helicopters hastily pulling American citizens, security forces, and Vietnamese refugees from the roof of the U.S. Embassy on April 30, 1975.

However the war’s formal closure is marked, this year has brought a host of commemorations, documentaries, museum exhibits, and school projects.

Helping to cap the host of national and community-centered ceremonies and retrospectives are a range of year-end events organized by the Rockbridge Historical Society, local veterans, and the state’s VA250 commission.

A total of 2.7 million American men and women served during the Vietnam War, with approximately 2.6 million deployed or drafted to South Vietnam, between 1965 to 1973.

Most frequently-if-fractionally summoned among the war’s tragic metrics: the 58,281 who died, their names now etched into the two black granite walls that ground the National Mall’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial. After 50 years, there are still the unrecovered remains of nearly 1,600 soldiers. One of those is Lt. Comm. Charles Parish, USNA ‘64, and class president of the Lexington High School class of 1960, who was shot down in his F-Phantom II fighter jet over North Vietnam on July 25, 1968.

In a newly designed exhibit hosted at the Rockbridge Historical Society Museum, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture highlights the 230,000-plus Virginians who served and 1,490 died in Vietnam. Only four states suffered a higher number of prisoners of war held in North Vietnam. Today, about 200,000 Vietnam-era veterans currently live in the commonwealth, which is also home to 60,000 Vietnamese Americans.

Recording Experiences

Locally, RHS continues to more comprehensively research the range of service personnel with Rockbridge ties, and to record the experiences from our area of those more laterally

involved. Total figures can vary, depending on the years they lived or were educated here.

To do so, we depend on the contributions of area families, alumni organizations, and the range of local veterans groups we’ve been actively visiting and enlisting. Some of those stories have already been told in public records and newly accessible digital resources. Newspaper and television archives provide earlier perspectives from the era, to complement our current retrospectives.

Crucially, for the preservation and promotion of local history, RHS continues to review, digitize, accession, and steward organizational scrapbooks, memorabilia, and photographs, alongside bequests of military decorations and documents, and individual and family keepsakes.

More personal experiences and culturally evolving memories of the war are necessarily varied, and need to be honored in their own terms. So do the accounts of public history, as we work to honestly voice and archive both local and national stories from the past, while considering their purpose and new potential for future generations.

Over the next two months, and continuing



ABOVE, loaned to RHS by the Virginia Museum of History & Culture through Dec. 14, “Virginia & the Vietnam War” is traveling to select sites statewide for two years. An audiovisual kiosk allows visitors to browse over three dozen oral history excerpts organized around key themes. AT LEFT, Lt. Cmdr. Charles Parish, LHS class of 1960, is still listed as missing in action after his fighter jet was shot down over North Vietnam in 1968. BELOW LEFT, Sgt. Michael Young, pictured the day after fighting in the Tet Offensive, Jan. 31, 1968, will be one of the panelists at the RHS Dec. 7 event. BELOW, Young (center) was honored in Nashville as the keynote speaker for his unit’s reunion in 2023.



through the next two years, the Rockbridge Historical Society and other community partners are organizing a broad, interactive, and inter-generational series of public events, exhibits, oral history projects, and film series to do just that.

Together, they seek to engage members of our community who experienced that long, trying, and deadly decade firsthand, as well as those who bear their stories today: “The Things They Carried” - to echo the resonant phrase of Sgt. Tim O’Brien, the celebrated author and infantryman awarded the Purple Heart while serving 1969-1970. O’Brien’s prize-winning 1990 memoir of that title stands among the many books and films to be featured in the next two Vietnam-tied meetings launching RHS’ new “Revolutionary Reading Group, 1776” on Dec. 17 and Jan. 13.

Museum Exhibit: Virginia and Vietnam
As one of 10 invited consultants for the VMHC’s flagship “Our Commonwealth” exhibit,

RHS is now hosting the commemorative displays traveling statewide for two years (free, Fridays-Sundays, 12-4 p.m., 101 E. Washington St.), with a special closing reception on Dec.13. Its 20 dramatic, interpretive panels and illustrative artifacts are curated to emphasize a comprehensive and inclusive sweep of themes that spotlight Virginians’ experiences. Several local Vietnam veterans previewed the exhibit last week, before all 200 seventh- and eighth-graders from Lylburn Downer undertook our age-tailored “scavenger hunt” on Veterans Day.

While browsing the images, artifacts and audiovisual clips, visitors can revisit a variety of familiar and lesser-known places, both “in country” and across Virginia. Representative stories foreground the wider range of people who managed needs in the field, and on the homefront. Some served in combat or in planning capacities, and managed logistics. Others provided medical care, both in the field and

for those who survived to return. Photographs and other documentary materials more systematically detail our state’s training protocols and bases, rival protests within our range of educational institutions, and the shifting priorities of politics, diplomacy, and mass media.

The exhibit’s accompanying audio-visual kiosk steers you through many of these themes: surveying the war’s attendant memorial landscape, framing national and international news coverage, and jointly inviting time-tempered reflections from the era’s war advocates and peace activists. More extensively, they provide portraits of homefront families who sent care packages, while waiting for personal or edited reports, before attending to funerals and new family arrangements.

After Thanksgiving, for additional weekday access, area residents and holiday visitors can
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Vietnam

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also view these mobile installations at the Lexington Library (Mondays-Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.), rotating back to our museum on weekends before closing on Dec. 14.

We're also arranging to share the exhibit and our related online materials with all five local middle and high schools, to be interpreted for classroom projects by their social studies teachers, area veterans who served in Vietnam and other campaigns, and members of the RHS Education Committee. We also invite new community volunteers to take advantage of this opportunity to help support those educational visits, and contribute to other more immediate and longer-term efforts in archiving and adapting these materials for future exhibits, social media galleries, and audiovisual resources.

Local Voices Remember: Rockbridge and Vietnam

Our most personally, locally grounded event is the community roundtable and open mic on Dec. 7 at 2 p.m. at the Rockbridge County High School auditorium that we've been organizing over the past year. Its opening panel will constellate a half-dozen residents recruited to voice a representative range of lived experiences during the war, here and abroad, among many more invited to share from the floor after their framing comments.

That panel will be moderated by Col. Houston Johnson, chair of the VMI History Department, who regularly teaches a course about the international campaigns in Indochina from 1945 to 1975. In meaningfully passing the baton to the next generation of citizen-soldiers from Virginia, he takes cadets to Vietnam as part of their own learning and service experience.



MIKE YOUNG (left) of Rockbridge County talks with Dallas Clark, deputy superintendent for finance and support at Virginia Military Institute, following last week's Veterans Day parade and ceremony. (Mary Woodson photo)

One of the invited panelists is retired U.S. Army Sgt. Michael Young, who served with the 716th Military Police Battalion in Saigon from February 1967 until February 1968. He counts himself a proud survivor of the 1968 Tet Offensive: the surprise attacks launched by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army only three weeks before his 12-month tour was to end.

Young's military training prepared him to continue a 46-year career in law enforcement, serving in Iowa, Florida, and Virginia, including 23 years as director of public safety at Washington and Lee University before retiring in 2013. A local member of both the Shenandoah Valley VFW Post 1499 and Post 126 of the American Legion in Buena Vista, he's also helped to plan the national reunions for his unit, including last year's three-day event, the first to be hosted in Rockbridge County.

RHS will be recording both those planned testimonies and voluntary witness from other combat veterans and administrative officers; medical providers and media professionals; friends, family,

and fellow congregants who endured the experience and uncertainties on the homefront, and who've helped support recovery and educational efforts; local historians and authors who continue to share purposeful perspectives for present and future generations.

When we previewed the exhibit together at our Museum, Mike shared, "I'm very happy and honored to help with this 50-year commemoration. As a Vietnam veteran, one of our fears is that we will be forgotten. So the Rockbridge Historical Society's long-term oral history projects, their visits to local schools, and Eric's presentation to our VFW post, are all a great help in making sure that doesn't happen.

"When talking to a friend recently, I noted that Lowe's provides a 10% veterans discount on purchases," he continued. "Next time you visit a store, restaurant, or cultural event, you may see a neighbor or friend requesting that small but significant honor. You may not have previously known that they're veterans. And you might be surprised

to realize how many Vietnam veterans live in our community overall, especially because many still don't talk about their service. But they are heroes just the same. Please don't ever forget their sacrifice."

While not required to sign up in advance, RHS invites you to contact us if you'd like to front particular stories to contribute to be meaningfully scheduled into the day's commemorative chorus. At the Rockbridge Regional Library in Lexington on Dec. 17 at 6 p.m., high school and college students are particularly invited to join the general public for more interpersonal conversation and the free screening of the 1968 episode of Ken Burns' 2017 documentary series.

Beyond these anniversary events, you can still write Director@RockbridgeHistory.org to arrange the most comfortable setting for you to record your own memories more privately or at greater length, next year. Or to relay those learned from those with Rockbridge ties who are no longer among us, as a continuing charge to the future.

Birders Walking Locher Tract

Join members of the Rockbridge Bird Club this Friday, Nov. 21, at 9 a.m. for a walk through Locher Tract, one of Rockbridge County's natural gems.

The 378-acre tract is located in the Jefferson National Forest across the river from Natural Bridge Station, offering riverfront, wetland and forest views along two trails. Birders will be on the lookout for Wood Duck, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper, Swamp Sparrow and Hermit Thrush in these varied habitats. The walk is the third in a new series of outings to local hot spots scheduled at the end of each month.

Non-members and inexperienced birders are welcome to participate. Birders should bring binoculars and wear sturdy shoes. In the event of rain, the walk will be canceled.

To get to Locher Tract, take Arnolds Valley Road (Va. 759) over Greenlee bridge to cross the James River. Make the first left on James River Road (Va. 782) and follow it to the very end, onto Forest Road #3093. This gravel road will end at the parking lot for the Locher Tract.

For more information or weather update, visit Rockbridge Bird Club on Facebook or www.rockbridgebirdclub.org.



THIS Red-breasted Nuthatch was photographed by Dick Rowe at the Locher Tract.

Brownsburg Calendars Available For Purchase

The 2026 Brownsburg calendar, the main annual fundraiser for the Brownsburg Museum, is now available to purchase.

This 13-month calendar features photographs of the greater Brownsburg area taken by residents and captures a true "local view" of this scenic part of Rockbridge County.

Calendars are \$18 each or \$16 each for orders of five calendars or more. Area residents can view the 13 photos and purchase calendars on the museum's website, <https://www.thebrownsburgmuseum.org/category/brownsburg-calendar>. Calendars are available to pick up in mid-November at Wade's Mill in Raphine during normal opening hours (Thursday-Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.). Customers will receive an email notifying them when the calendars arrive at the mill. Calendars can also be mailed for \$6 each, payable at time of order.

Proceeds from calendar sales support the operating expenses of the volunteer-run Brownsburg Museum.

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