

## **Brunswick Memorial Home, East Brunswick, NJ**

2021 Best of the Best POE

“Untold Stories”

The Brunswick Memorial Home dedicated 2020-2021 to honoring and memorializing the stories of US Veterans of WWII, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam and Afghanistan. Veterans from Vietnam through WWII currently range in age from their 60's through their 90's and unfortunately, their stories are rapidly being lost. This year alone, over 200 Veterans residing in NJ Veterans homes lost their lives due to Covid; this doesn't include those that died in other locations or due to other causes.

We wanted to preserve Veteran stories. Our Care Team came up with a list of general questions to ask Veterans. Their answers would be compiled and then displayed nicely in a binder, so that their story could be shared with their family. The interviews at times became emotional. While our time with each Veteran allowed us to discuss the basic questions about enlistment dates, training, places stationed, what their jobs were...we also got to discuss the personal side of it, like who they were leaving behind when deployed, did they carry mementos, did they make life-long friends, did they experience much loss, who was waiting for them when they returned home, and what advice they would pass on to future generations.

Our first meeting with a Veteran was a WWII Vet. The interview was conducted in his home because he is 94 and no longer drives. We bought lunch for him, sat down around his kitchen table, and listened. Follow up meetings were scheduled to ensure he got to tell his whole story. He looked forward to our visits and even more so to sharing his finished story with his family over Thanksgiving.

We have been meeting with Veterans at local VFWs several times a month. We have found that interviewing them at the VFW has worked well as their stories often feed off of one another. They feel more comfortable telling their story with others that have similar experiences. They often brought in photos of their time in the service to go along with their stories.

During one interview of a Vietnam Veteran, he told a story of how about fifteen years after he returned from Vietnam; he received an official government envelope in the mail. His initial thought was “they can't want me back now” but it was a letter informing him that he was eligible for Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm Unit Citation Badge. Because the award is a foreign award, the US Department of the Army does not issue it. We researched, found, and purchased the Badge for the veteran and presented it to him at the VFW.

During another Vietnam Veteran's interview, he stated that he didn't have immediate family to share his story with and wasn't sure if he should participate. We encouraged him to share anyway; his story should still be heard. Not only did he share his story, but he felt we should have one of his “cruise books” (the “yearbook” of his time at sea on that particular

deployment). We were honored to have it. When his book was completed he was in tears and said he was going to place it in his safe. Two weeks later this veteran was sent to the hospital with Covid19 and never recovered. However, he was able to tell his story for the world to hear before he passed away.

During the course of our time at the VFWs we have learned how entertainment and music played such a big role in the lives of the service men. What a thrill it was to have Bob Hope come onto their ships! Even our interview questionnaire has changed as a result of this. We've now added a section that asks what brings them back to those days for good or bad reasons. This came about as juke box selections were played and how some of them wouldn't leave the room when "their" song came on. They remember what ship they were on or what their job was as soon as the music starts!

These veteran stories remind us "Freedom is not free". Some of these stories are not easy to tell. It is our duty to listen. It is our duty to thank them. It is our duty to get help for those who battle with limbs lost or PTSD. This project may have been done to thank, memorialize, and honor Veterans but the true honor was ours. This project was the most interesting and thought provoking history lesson one could ever have and we will continue listening and recording these stories as long as there are Veterans that wish to tell them.