



Exhibits at the National World War II Museum: Top: D-Days in the Pacific and Bottom: The Home Front

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Dr. Nick Mueller | President and CEO of the National World War II Museum

Backyard Conversation Leads to National World War II Museum

For many years, Dr. Nick Mueller would stop by the home of his best friend after work. His friend was noted World War II historian Dr. Stephen Ambrose, and the pair had met while teaching a class in U.S. history together at the University of New Orleans.

“I would have a glass of sherry in his backyard every afternoon, and we would cook up our schemes,” said Mueller.

One of their schemes began in 1990, when Ambrose was working on a book about the Normandy D-Day invasion in 1944. His research included taking more than 500 oral histories of those who had served in the D-Day landings. The soldiers with whom he spoke were so moved by the effort to preserve their stories that they began sending him memorabilia. Soon, his office at the university was overflowing with parachutes, diaries, bibles, maps, weapons and other personal items. Ambrose knew that these priceless artifacts required proper curatorial care, not a cramped corner of someone’s personal workspace.

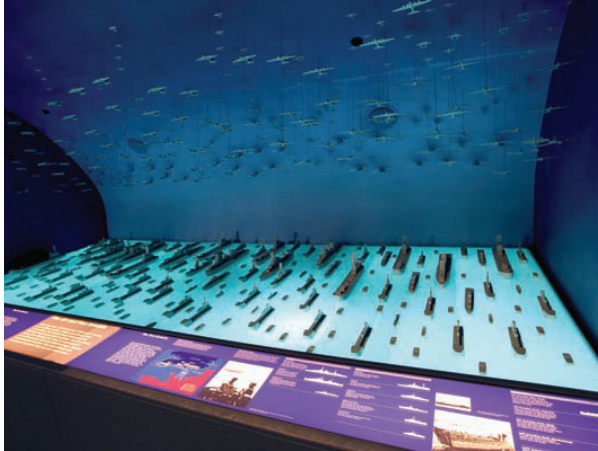
During one backyard conversation, Ambrose pitched a solution. “He said, ‘Let’s build a D-Day museum,’” recalled Mueller. “And I said, ‘That’s the best idea you’ve ever had.’”

The two friends established the National D-Day Foundation and set about raising funds. At first, they believed that they could complete the project for about \$4 million. Ten years and \$25 million later, the National D-Day Museum debuted in downtown New Orleans with global print and televised media coverage. The official opening took place on June 6, 2000, the 56th anniversary of the Normandy invasion. Mueller was named the museum’s president and CEO.

The museum’s collection includes the oral histories and personal memorabilia of soldiers as well as larger artifacts, including a Sherman tank and a Higgins Landing Craft. Through films and exhibits, visitors follow the story of the D-Day invasions of Normandy and the Pacific through the three levels and four galleries of the Louisiana Memorial Pavilion.

From its early days, the museum proved so successful with visitors that they wanted more. The founders launched plans for the museum to move beyond their original vision to tell the entire story of the American

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The American Sector Restaurant: Visitors to the Museum can take a break from exhibits to unwind in the American Sector restaurant that is open to the general public. **The Museum's signature live show, *Let Freedom Swing!*** plays Friday and Saturday nights with a Sunday matinee. **Normandy Exhibit** displays the scope of the greatest invasion force in history.

experience in "the war that changed the world." The museum was renamed the National World War II Museum and received official recognition by Congress in 2003. Sadly, Ambrose died the year before, in 2002. Two years later, Mueller and the national Board of Trustees launched an ambitious \$300 million "Road to Victory" capital campaign with the goal of raising funds to build two multimedia attractions and four additional exhibit pavilions to portray all campaigns of the war on land, sea and air, and each branch of the U.S. military services.

After a successful start, fundraising efforts slowed following Hurricane Katrina in 2004, and, more significantly, the national financial crisis that began in 2008. Seeking to reenergize the campaign, Mueller turned to philanthropy consultants Marts & Lundy in April 2009.

"We needed a short, surgical assessment. We wanted them to come in and audit our internal procedures and capacities, and make sure our goals were realistic," said Mueller. He needed the recommendations in six weeks—in time for a June board meeting.

The Marts & Lundy team, led by Senior Consultants Tim Portwood and Willard White, traveled to New Orleans for on-site interviews of museum staff and board members. They made a thorough analysis of the museum's development program, from donor solicitations to management of fundraising software.

Additionally, "We helped them recast the case for the capital campaign, which had stalled," said White. Because \$300 million sounded overwhelming to donors, "We recommended that they isolate the goals for private philanthropy, and put the spotlight on the pavilions and on short-term goals."

The recommendations came in time for the board meeting, and the new campaign approach brought success. The museum focused on a shorter-term goal of \$80 million for two pavilions, over the next three years. "Donors were attracted to the more limited time frame," said Mueller. "They didn't have to wait six to seven years before it came to fruition."

In November 2009, the museum opened the Stage Door Canteen, which features a 1940s-style musical show; the American Sector Restaurant; and the Solomon Victory Theater. The theater offers a powerful 4-D cinematic experience with "Beyond All Boundaries," a film created exclusively for the museum and narrated by Tom Hanks.

White, who has worked closely with scores of museums over the years, was impressed with the theater-shaking film. "It's just fantastic ... Nick knew that you had to have the 'wow' effect at the museum sooner rather than later," he said. "In general, younger visitors are not going to museums. But the National World War II Museum is getting that population. Their audience mix is what every public museum dreams of."



The Solomon Victory Theater, Stage Door Canteen and American Sector restaurant complex opened to the public in November 2009.



Race and War Exhibit: Artifacts, posters, videos and interactive touch screens help audiences learn about race issues and warfare in the Pacific Theater.

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He looks forward to completing the entire museum campus by 2015, to honor the more than 16 million Americans who served their country in World War II. When finished, the expansion project will quadruple the size of the existing facility and add state-of-the-art programs and exhibit space, a library and archives, and more space for collections and conservation work. An endowment campaign will provide long-term funding for educational programs, research and oral histories, and future exhibitions.

Mueller has set out an ambitious timeline, but "I'd like to get it finished while we still have World War II veterans with us." Sadly, only 1.8 million remain. The museum "should have been built 30 years ago by Congress. But the 'Greatest Generation' was a modest bunch...they couldn't get any traction on efforts to build it in D.C.," he said, "So we finally said, 'Let's just do it here.'"

With more than 130,000 charter members throughout the U.S., and educational programs offered in every state, the museum is truly a national treasure. But it all started one afternoon, with two friends kicking around ideas after work.

"We were best friends for 30 years," said Mueller of Ambrose. "We made a lot of plans. And we got most of them done. This was the best of all." ●