Delta Sources and Resources

By Roscoe Barns III

The Miss-Lou Military Museum and
Veterans Welcome/Information Center
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The Miss-Lou Military Museum and Veterans Welcome/Information Center exists as a vital resource to inspire communities of young people and pay tribute to the men and women who served in the United States military. Located in the southern part of Natchez, Mississippi, the museum aims to educate the public about the contributions of military personnel by giving local residents and visitors immersive experiences that are interactive, memorable, and visually stimulating. These experiences are made possible by the use of military artifacts, carefully crafted GI Joe figures, well-designed ship and aircraft



The Miss-Lou Military Museum and Veterans Welcome/Information Center.
107 Jefferson Davis Boulevard in Natchez, Mississippi.
Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

models, uniforms of different military branches, and photos, among other items. The museum may be seen as a clear and tangible way to recognize all branches of the U.S. military, dating back to the First World War. The Miss-Lou Military Museum and Veterans Welcome/Information Center. 107 Jefferson Davis Boulevard in Natchez, Mississippi. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

History and Mission

The Miss-Lou Military Museum and Veterans Welcome/Information Center is a nonprofit organization with 501-C3 status. It first opened in 2018 at the VFW Post 9573 building at 318 Sgt. Prentiss Drive in Natchez. The VFW provided a room for the museum on its second floor. However, on Nov. 12, 2023, the museum celebrated its grand opening at its current location at 107 Jefferson Davis Blvd., where it now has better access and visibility. The museum occupies a storefront between Highway 61 South and the Grand Village of the Natchez Indians.

The museum is operated by the Home with Heroes Foundation Inc. The foundation is a private non-profit organization that works to help and honor veterans, as well as their loved ones. Its founding president, G. Mark LaFrancis, passed in June 2024 following a long battle with cancer. In August 2023, LaFrancis said the museum fulfills a dream he had with the Home with Heroes Foundation. Among other things, he said, “It’s a gift to the community, especially the veterans' community.” LaFrancis said his aim was to display many donated and loaned items from local residents and veterans. He created a “Try Me On” section to allow young visitors and others to dress up as military personnel.

LaFrancis was a retired veteran of the military. He served a total of twenty-three years in the Air Force, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve. In addition to being a veteran, LaFrancis was an author, poet, journalist, and filmmaker. He authored several books for young readers and co-authored *The Parchman Ordeal: 1965 Natchez Civil Rights Injustice* (The History Press, 2018).

“He is also well-known throughout the Miss-Lou (Mississippi-Louisiana) as a champion of veteran’s affairs,” *The Natchez Democrat* reported after his passing. Natchez Mayor Dan Gibson described him as a treasure to southwest Mississippi. In an interview with *The Natchez Democrat*, Gibson said, “Mark’s love for others, including all he did for our veterans, made such an impact on Natchez. He contributed in so many ways.”



The late G. Mark LaFrancis, president of Home with Heroes Foundation Inc. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

The foundation’s current president is retired Army Lt. Col. Larry Smith. According to Smith, the museum is a community arm of the foundation that was created “as a tribute to veterans who have served the nation in war and in peace.” The museum focuses on the United States military history beginning with World War I. Its mission is centered around five terms that summarize the overall thrust of the museum. Those terms are:

* Tribute: The museum is a way to honor the men and women who served in the Armed Forces, many of whom lived in the Miss-Lou area.
* Preservation: It is a way to preserve artifacts (i.e. uniforms, medals, collectibles, and more), some of which are priceless.

* Education: It is a way to educate young and old alike about the contribution of men and women who served in the Armed Forces.
* Inspiration: It is a way to inspire visitors to be proud of those who served in the United States military.
* Friendship: It is a way to cultivate friendship among visitors, especially veterans.

Audience and Operations

According to Smith and his team of volunteers, the people who visit the museum are quite diverse. Visitors include people of all ages, races, and backgrounds. Some of them are working adults and some are retired. Although many are military veterans, some are students from local schools. No matter their backgrounds, however, all are welcome, said Smith.



Retired Army Lt. Col. Larry Smith and his wife Jackie (ctr.) display the Quilt of Valor, May 21, 2024, with Juliette Cassagne (l.), regent of the Natchez Chapter NSDAR, and Deborah Springer (r.), chair of the Natchez Chapter NSDAR Service for Veterans committee. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

In regard to operations, a total of twenty people, including board members of the Home with Heroes Foundation, help run the museum. Support also comes from Boy Scout Troop 168, Natchez High School’s Air Force JROTC, as well as the VFW, the American Legion Post 4, and the Natchez Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution. In May 2024, the museum hosted a ceremony in which the Natchez Chapter NSDAR presented Smith with the Quilt of Valor

awarded in partnership with the Quilts of Valor Foundation. In addition to individuals and local businesses, two of the museum's biggest supporters include the City of Natchez and the City of Vidalia in Louisiana. Vidalia is located just across the Mississippi River from Natchez.

Along with greeting visitors and helping with the exhibits, volunteers also engage in fundraising to keep the museum afloat. "We are grateful for our local donors, and we rely on them for their community-wide display of support," Smith explained. Home Bank, Atmos Energy, and Entergy are among the foundation's largest sources of grant aid. Private fundraising efforts are also critical. In late April 2024, volunteers with the museum hosted a Patriotic Poker Run fundraiser to benefit Home with Heroes. The event featured motorcycle riders and motorists in other vehicles traveling to veteran and military-related venues throughout Adams County, including the Natchez National Cemetery. Participants also toured the museum.

As with its fundraising, the museum's work to increase its visibility is ongoing. Since its grand opening, it has appeared in several newspapers and a regional magazine, including *The Natchez Democrat*, *Concordia Sentinel*, *The Bluff City Post*, and *Miss-Lou Life & Style Magazine*. Presentations about the museum are given at the Friday Forum, a public program hosted by the Natchez-Adams County Chamber of Com-



The GI Joe collection.
Created and donated by Robert Foley, former Green Beret and museum volunteer.
Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

merce. The museum also publishes full color trifold brochures that its volunteers distribute throughout Natchez and Adams County.

Museum Tours

The museum allows for “self-guided tours” that are enhanced by signage that explains each of its exhibits. Visitors are presented aspects of military history in several categories, all of which have strong appeal with its audience. One of its popular features is a collection of GI Joe combat figures, which Smith described as “one of the most accurate and exquisite collections around.” The collection, which consists of sixty GI Joes dressed in uniforms, is a tribute to veterans who served

during foreign wars. Smith noted all of the figures were created and donated by Robert Foley, a former Green Beret who volunteers as one of the museum’s greeters.

A favorite of children is the “Try Me On” section where they can actually try on military uniforms. This includes the wearing of military caps, helmets, and jackets, among other items. The experience is for people of all ages, but it is especially enjoyed by young visitors. According to volunteers, the “Try Me On” section is the perfect place for visitors to experience the moment and take a few selfies in the process. The mu-



Ray Hollis, U.S. Marine Corps veteran and museum volunteer, pictured here in the Try Me On section. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

seum also offers a “fold-a-flag” segment in which visitors are shown how to properly fold an American Flag.

Artifacts like the Rosie the Riveter welder mask, shed light on World War II history and the impact it had on American women in the workplace. The Rosie exhibit includes the actual work suit and welder’s hood worn by Mary Baroni Warren, a young woman who worked in the Naval shipyards during World War II. She reportedly became a nationally ranked first-class welder.

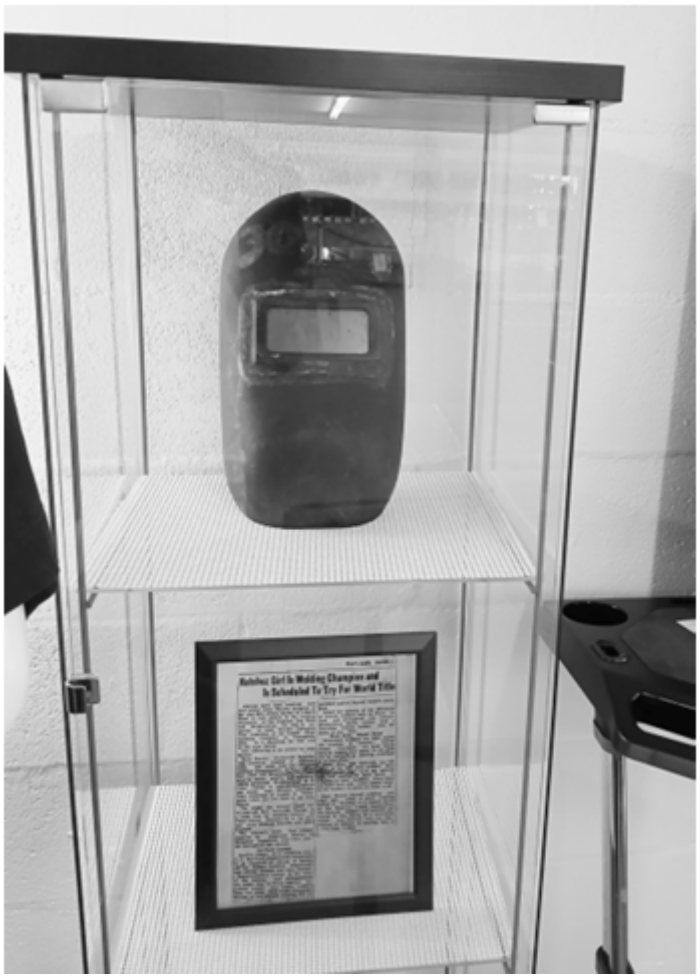
Military service items are also displayed. They include uniforms, a patriotic quilt, maps, military decoration medals and awards, patches, field equipment, eating utensils, and challenge coins.

The display that stops people in their tracks—and causes them to reflect—is the Gulf War Tribute section, a somber part of the museum that honors the men and women from Mississippi who died serving in the Global War on Terrorism. Presented as “The Wall of Remembrance,” the section features photographs of 75 military service members who were killed in action in Iraq or

Afghanistan. Their sacrifice, said Smith, is something that should never be forgotten.

Museum programs

In addition to providing the community with artifacts, images, and important stories on military history, the museum engages the community by hosting or participating in several programs related to veterans. For example, each year volunteers with the museum and Home with Heroes participate in the nationally-observed



Welder’s Mask worn by real life “Rosie the Riveter”
Mary Baroni Warren.
Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.



A section of the Wall of Remembrance, honoring the men and women from Mississippi who died serving in the Global War on Terrorism. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III

Wreaths Across America program in which wreaths are laid on the graves of American fallen service members. This event occurs on the second Saturday in December. The volunteers also raise funds each year in order to purchase the wreaths that they place on the graves.

On Veterans Day in 2023, Smith visited the Natchez National Cemetery where he joined Mayor Dan Gibson and other volunteers in placing flowers on the grave of Landsman Wilson Brown (1841-1900), the only Naval Medal of Honor recipient buried among the 8,000 patriots who lay at rest in the cemetery.

For Veterans Week in 2023, the museum collaborated with the Natchez Museum of African American History and Culture to co-host the public showing of the film *Six Triple Eight* (2023), which was directed and produced by James William Theres. The film tells the story of the 855

women in the first and only predominantly black female battalion who served in Europe during World War II. Among other achievements, the battalion cleared a two-year backlog of mail and helped process for delivery more than seventeen million pieces of mail near the end of the war. Two local veterans of that storied unit were Louise Bruce and Gwendolyn Freeman Johnson who are among those buried at the Natchez



Veterans' Welcome and Information Center. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

National Military Cemetery.

Volunteers with the museum also participate each year in the local Veterans Day parade. They have organized bus trips to the World War II museum in New Orleans, Louisiana, as well.

Unlike typical museums, the Miss-Lou Military Museum includes an Information Center for veterans in need. Among other things, its purpose is to assist veterans by seeking to answer their questions and provide them with information on veteran benefits and other issues of concern. A computer is available for their use.

"This is a center where veterans can mingle, have free coffee, read, relax, and gain information about benefits, activities, and more," according to a brochure published by the museum. "Occasionally, professional advisors will visit the center to meet with veterans."

With regard to the museum’s future, Smith said that it is bright and promising. That view is shared by the foundation and the volunteers.

“Home with Heroes plans to continue to operate the museum and information center as its primary interface with veterans, their families, and the community the foundation supports,” Smith said. “It seeks to raise its local profile and attract more tourists to Natchez while increasing awareness of the foundation among the veterans in need that it serves.”

For More Information:

Tours at the Miss-Lou Military Museum and Veterans Welcome/Information Center are free to the public. Donations are accepted. The museum is located at 107 Jefferson Davis Blvd., Natchez, Mississippi 39120. Hours of operation are Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. On the first and third Saturday, it is open from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Other hours are available for groups by appointment. The museum is wheelchair accessible. Parking is available in front of the building. For more information, call Executive Director Larry Smith at 253-970-2090. Send email to Smithlaiii@gmail.com or homewithheroes@live.com

Information is also available at homewithheroes.org or through the Home with Heroes Facebook page.



Military Artifacts and Models display featuring period military helmets and aircraft models. Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.



Female uniforms.
On the left is a female Army officer’s dress blues, a uniform once worn by Home with Heroes Vice President Gabi Crousillac. The uniform on the right is an actual women’s work jumpsuit at Bell Aircraft in Atlanta, Georgia, from 1942 to 1943. It was donated by Patricia Jamison, whose mother, Bertie Torgerson, was an original “Rosie the Riveter” who worked at Bell Aircraft during World War II.
Photograph courtesy of Roscoe Barnes III.

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