



MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MINNESOTA
MINNESOTA MILITARY MUSEUM

ALLIES

Newsletter for Members and Friends

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Minnesota's National Guard and the 1890 Sea Wing Disaster

By Frederick L. Johnson

"Dark black clouds...so low you would think they'd touch your head," moved menacingly down Lake Pepin toward Lake City and the Minnesota National Guard's summer field training camp, Camp Lakeview.

Officers of the Guard's First Infantry Regiment recognized the danger. Except for stables near the lakeshore, the campground had no sturdy permanent buildings. The men headed for their tents. It was shortly after eight p.m., Sunday, July 13, 1890.¹

A group of officers took refuge in the camp's hospital tent, sitting in "inky darkness" awaiting the storm. A regimental history recorded what happened next: "Then for a moment all was still as death. Men rushed from their tents with axes and hatchets...to drive in their tent pins. In less than one minute...the cyclone struck us with all its terrific force. The hospital tent...went up like a balloon and then came down on its occupants like a big wet cloth

that it was. The air was filled with flying tent poles, tent pins, fence boards, and everything movable moved. Not a light was burning in the camp, and between the flashes of lightning the angry waves of Lake Pepin could be seen rolling mountain high."²

The tent of the regiment's commander, Col. William B. Bend, soared aloft and his flying steamer trunk struck him in the leg, bruising him badly. During the late 1880s, Col. Bend had been a leading proponent of establishing "a permanent [National Guard] camp ground at some distance from the cities" [St. Paul and Minneapolis]. He had good reason. When the Guard trained at Ft. Snelling, Bend discovered the nearness of large cities and their excellent railroad connections led "...many employers whose men were attending camp for instruction, [to insist] upon their attendance at their places of business during business hours, thus limiting attendance at the camp."

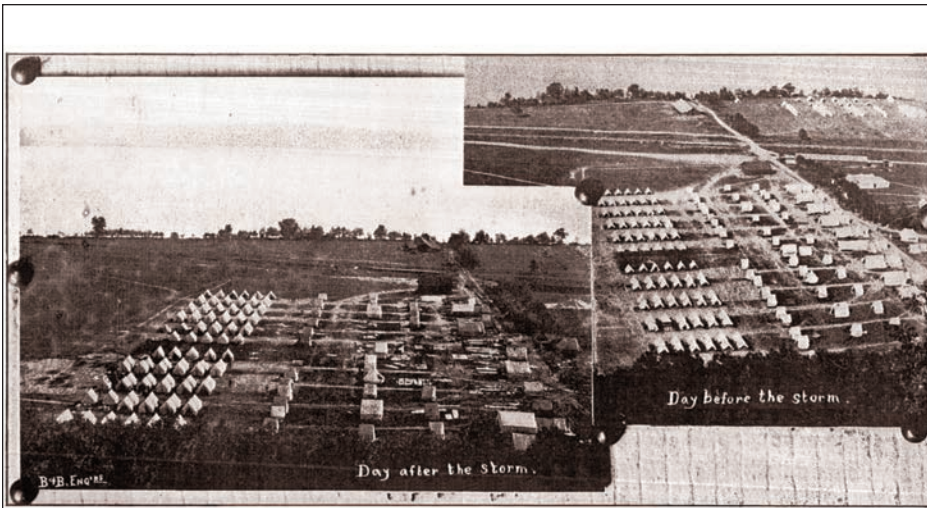
In 1887 the guard secured, at no cost, a lease on land south of Lake City, 58 miles by rail from St. Paul and presumably out of reach of those interfering big city industries and businesses.³

Heavy rain and hail followed the damaging winds. Mounted troops, camped closest to the lakeshore, were more exposed than the others. The cavalrymen were fortunate to lose only three tents. Water ran foot-deep on some of the tented city's streets. With "not a dry cot, blanket or coat" in the camp, the guardsmen, wet to the skin, retreated to the stables and huddled together in the stalls. Now without medical supplies, regimental cavalry surgeon Capt. William H. Caine, a Stillwater physician, along with another medical officer, likely Reynolds J.



The *Sea Wing* and attached barge *Jim Grant* are pictured on the Mississippi River as they were at the time of the July 13, 1890 accident. (All photos from the Goodhue County Historical Society.)

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Damage from the winds that tore through Camp Lakeview is still in evidence in a photo taken the next day. The tents of guardsmen have been reset, but the large regimental hospital, mess and service tents have been destroyed. Stables where guardsmen sought refuge are visible in the distance near the lake.

Fitzgerald, saddled up for a trip to Lake City. They expected to find what was needed.⁴

But Caine and his companion discovered a city devastated by the storm. More than thirty downtown buildings had been damaged, some nearly demolished. The officers soon noticed anxious residents gathered at the Lake City landing. In the distance, off Central Point, local men in rowboats battled waves. The steamboat *Sea Wing* had cap-

sized during the storm, and Lake Citians were searching for survivors.

Earlier in the day the *Sea Wing*, 135 feet long and 16 feet wide, along with its attached barge *Jim Grant*, had steamed into Lake City with some 200 passengers on board. The Sunday excursionists were returning home—some called it “the event of the season”—after visiting Camp Lakeview. Most of the visitors came from Red Wing and had special interest in seeing their hometown unit, the First Regiment’s Company G. They were lured by the promise of an afternoon of Guardsmen’s presentations, capped by a regimental dress parade and band concert. Gov. William R. Merriam and his entourage had viewed this program the day before.⁵

All went well until late afternoon winds and rain halted activities and scattered the crowd. By seven o’clock, Captain David Niles Wethern, pilot and co-owner of the *Sea Wing*, was in a quandary. He wanted to leave Lake City, but knew it was unlikely he could successfully recall all his passengers. Nevertheless, Wethern decided to depart at eight, believing the squall that hit the area was the end of bad weather. On board were 215 passengers, including the captain’s wife and their two sons.⁶



The *Sea Wing*, mostly submerged, is moored against its barge, *Jim Grant*. National Guardsmen used the barge as a base of operations. Holes chopped in the steamboat’s cabin roof allowed soldiers to remove bodies from the wreckage. Lake City steamboat *Ethel Howard*, (background), was used in transporting accident victims back to Red Wing.

A half-hour out of Lake City, the *Sea Wing* encountered heavy winds coming off the Minnesota shore. Captain Wethern turned his vessel and its barge to meet the gale. The worsening tempest created dangerous waves between six and eight feet high, forcing many passengers into the ship’s small cabin. The *Sea Wing* rode up on a wave, sending those in the cabin tumbling to starboard. In an instant, the ship rolled over.

Excursionists trapped in the cabin had no chance to escape and drowned. Others floundered in the water, while about 25, including Captain Wethern, managed to secure holds on the steamboat’s slippery bottom. A few survivors swam ashore, while those on the

barge *Jim Grant* drifted downstream to safety. As it neared Central Point, several young men jumped from the barge and swam ashore. They raced on foot to Lake City and spread the alarm. A crowd quickly gathered at the city's boat landing. Stalwart rescuers rowed to the scene.

It was at this time the two Camp Lakeview medical officers arrived in the city. They sent a request to their base for immediate assistance at the *Sea Wing* accident scene, and then headed to Central Point. Recovery of the dead continued through the evening. Charles A. Betcher of Red Wing's Company D was serving as Captain of the Guard and hurried to Central Point. Soon, Major Arthur P. Pierce, a regimental field officer from Red Wing, assumed control there. At around five the next morning a Lake City steamer left the scene carrying to Red Wing a heartbreaking cargo of 52 bodies.⁷

Daybreak Monday morning revealed a now placid Lake Pepin and the Central Point shoreline littered with wreckage. A body was seen drifting a hundred yards off shore; Company G Private Albert Kappel swam out to retrieve it. Guard surgeons Reynolds Fitzgerald of Minneapolis and T. C. Clarke from Stillwater set up a temporary morgue near the beach. An armed detail of Guardsmen patrolled the area to maintain control of a growing crowd of onlookers.⁸

Minnesota Adjutant General John H. Mullen—his home in Wabasha was just 18 miles from the scene—soon arrived at Central Point. Forty-seven-year-old Mullen had earned commendation for his heroic Civil War service with the 12th Connecticut Infantry, particularly during the critical battle at Cedar Creek. After the war he earned a law degree and settled in Wabasha, later becoming city attorney.⁹ He learned 60 bodies had been found and estimated that 40 remained in the water.

Mullen now ordered the First Regiment's Minneapolis-based Artillery Battery A to the scene. He had decided to cannonade the waters around Central Point in hope of raising bodies. The unit arrived at 11 a.m. with two cannon drawn by four horses. Within minutes the artillerymen fired several volleys into the water, but no victims surfaced.¹⁰

Two steamboats now combined to drag the partially-righted *Sea Wing* closer to shore. They also pushed the barge, *Jim Grant*, against the badly damaged vessel, enabling Guardsmen to use it as an operational base. Company G sergeants Burton Perkins and Oscar Seebach, along with privates Abram Howe, John Olson, and Royal Hubbell, removed more victims. Lake City men commenced dragging operations, working into the evening without success. Small boats crisscrossed off Central Point but found no victims. At sunset, National Guardsmen, soon to resume night patrol of the shoreline, took naps while awaiting a meal. Capt. Caine, the Stillwater physician, assumed command of the night patrol.



Guardsmen place the body of a *Sea Wing* victim in a skiff. This photo came from *The Illustrated American*, a leading American news magazine. The accident became an important national story.

On Tuesday morning Lake Pepin's shoreline echoed with the muffled thunder of explosive charges being dropped into the water. General Mullen had placed a regular army officer, Lt. Edwin F. Glenn, in charge of dynamiting the waters between Lake City's Central Point and the Wisconsin shore. Mullen hoped the action would raise bodies. It did not. Undeterred, the Guard commander ordered 300 pounds of dynamite for the next day's operations.¹¹

Church bells began tolling in Red Wing 9 o'clock Tuesday morning. The town of 6,000, called the "City of the Dead" in newspaper reports, faced the sad task of burying accident victims. Most of the deceased and missing, about 80, were from Red Wing and its nearby townships. Forty-four funerals were conducted that day; residents knew more would follow.¹²

On late Tuesday afternoon National Guard sentinels sighted an object floating in the water. Sgt. Graw, chief musician of the mounted troop, rowed to the scene and found the body of girl buoyed by a piece of wood tangled in her dress. Later, a small steam yacht carried the remains to the Red Wing boat landing where, by lantern light, Kasper Vieths identified his daughter Rikka. It was now quiet at Central Point. Adjutant General Mullen boarded a train and went to his Wabasha home for a night's rest.¹³

Early Wednesday morning, Lake Pepin began to give up its remaining dead. Bodies floated in a small bay just south of Central Point. Warm waters had led to their decomposition. The crew of one small steam yacht gathered eight and headed to Red Wing. More boatmen went to

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the scene and commenced work. Victims were tied to the back of small skiffs and rowed to shore where their remains were placed in ice-filled coffins. Identification of the bloated and blackened bodies proved a ghastly task.¹⁴

A full accounting showed that of the 215 on board the *Sea Wing*, 98 had drowned. There had been 57 women and girls on the excursion, and only seven survived. The dead included the wife and youngest son of ship captain David Wethern. With all victims recovered, the National Guard ceded control of the remaining operations to civil authorities.

Inspection officers dispatched by federal authorities reached the accident scene while bodies were still being recovered. They started interviewing all survivors in preparation for a hearing during which the crew would testify. On July 17, Captain Wethern released his version of events to newspapers. Four days later, inspectors called him to St. Paul for its hearing. Wethern was found guilty of unskillfulness and overloading the *Sea Wing*; his license was suspended. The inspectors forwarded their findings the U.S. District Attorney Eugene Hay in Minneapolis and asked for Wethern's prosecution.

On July 25 the city of Red Wing held a public memorial service for victims of the *Sea Wing* disaster, drawing some 5,000 mourners. Appropriately, Company G's Glee Club, which included many of the soldiers who had worked with such dedication at the accident scene, represented the Minnesota National Guard.

It is noteworthy that Sgt. Otto Seebach, one of the Company G men recovering victims from the *Sea Wing* wreckage, later distinguished himself with the federalized Thirteenth Minnesota Infantry during the Spanish-American War. In August 1898, Seebach, now a captain and commanding Company G, was in the Philippines leading the Thirteenth Minnesota against Spanish positions in Manila. The war was winding down and little opposition was expected. Nonetheless, a fierce firefought broke out and Seebach was shot through the chest. The Minnesotans prevailed, and Seebach, brevetted a Major for gallantry, recovered. During the First World War, Major Seebach was selected to organize the Minnesota Home Guard.¹⁵

Notes

¹ Dolores Haustein Harris, "Writer's Grandfather Gives Firsthand Account of Historic Tragedy," *Generations of Today* (July 2000) 29–31, 42, the quote is from Harris's grandfather and *Sea Wing* disaster witness Casper "Cap" Haustein. I. B. Woodward, editor, *Historical Sketch and Souvenir, First Battalion Artillery NGSM, Battery A*, (Minneapolis: Miller Printing, 1892) not paginated.

² Here and two paragraphs below, Woodward, editor, *Historical Sketch and Souvenir*, not paginated.

³ F. W. Seeley, *Biennial Report of the Adjutant General of Minnesota, for the Two Years Ending July 31, 1888* (St. Paul: The Pioneer Press Company, 1889) 25–26.

⁴ Frederick L. Johnson, *The Sea Wing Disaster: Tragedy on Lake Pepin* (Red Wing: Goodhue County Historical Society, 2014) 48–49.

⁵ Gladys E. Camp, "Sea Wing Foundered 83 Years Ago," *Red Wing Republican Eagle*, July 13, 1973, 1. 7. Johnson, *The Sea Wing Disaster*, 32.

⁶ Here and below, "A Statement from Captain Wethern," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 17, 1890, 1. Johnson, *The Sea Wing Disaster*, 40–43.

⁷ "Hurled to Doom Without Warning," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 13, 1927, 7 carries an interview with Captain Wethern and provides his account of the accident. "Lake Pepin's Horror," *Lake City Graphic Sentinel*, July 15, 1890, 1. "Major Pierce's Efforts," *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 18, 1890, 1. "Brave Militiamen in Role of Grace Darlings," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 16, 1890, 1.

⁸ Johnson, *The Sea Wing Disaster*, 58–59.

⁹ "In Memoriam: John Henry Mullen," *Journal of the Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Encampment of the Department of Minnesota, Grand Army of the Republic*, (Minneapolis: Harrison & Smith, 1907) 142–143.

¹⁰ Here and below, "Scene at the Wreck," and "Work of Recovery," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 15, 1890, 1. "Patrolled Constantly," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 16, 1890, 1.

¹¹ "Dynamite Employed," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 16, 1890, 1. "Seeking Friends," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 15, 1890, 1.

¹² Here and below, "City of the Dead," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, July 15, 1890, 4. "The Bells Toll," *Minneapolis Journal*, July 15, 1890, 1. "Mournful Day," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 16, 1890, 1. "A Day of Funerals," *St. Paul Dispatch*, July 15, 1890, 1.

¹³ Johnson, *The Sea Wing Disaster*, 73–74. "Floating Near Shore," and "Listing the Missing," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 16, 1890, 1.

¹⁴ Here and below, "Given Up by Pepin," and "Bloated and Blackened," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 17, 1890, 1.

¹⁵ For a review of the Minnesotans and this firefought, see Frederick L. Johnson, "The Thirteenth Minnesota and the Battle for Manila," *MNopedia*, <http://www.mnopedia.org/event/thirteenth-minnesota-and-battle-manila>. William C. Caine and Reynolds J. Fitzgerald, National Guard physicians involved in the *Sea Wing* disaster, also served in the Spanish-American War.

FREDERICK JOHNSON is the author of ten books and numerous articles on Minnesota history. His most recent book, published in 2014, is *The Sea Wing Disaster: Tragedy on Lake Pepin*. It may be purchased at the Minnesota Military Museum or online from the Goodhue County Historical Society in Red Wing by going to <http://goodhuecountyhistory.org/gift-shop/>

DIRECTOR'S UPDATE

By Jeff Thielen



We never seem to say thank you or tell others they are appreciated enough. If you are reading this as a member or supporter of the Military Historical Society of Minnesota, I would like to say thanks for your support. Your moral, volunteer, and financial support is appreciated by all of us at the museum; together we work to support our mission to "educate the public on the service of Minnesota's veterans, to preserve a record of

their service through exhibits of the Minnesota Military Museum, and to preserve the artifacts related to their service for future generations." Thank you.

If you have the opportunity, please also help me express thanks to your local state legislators for their continued support. Two years ago special legislation was

approved allowing us to fund an archivist position for two years. This year we again worked with Representative Ron Kresha of Little Falls and Senator Paul Gazelka of Baxter and were allocated funding for the archivist position for another two years. Chad is doing a great job of processing the archival collection and this funding will insure the work continues. If you have time please check out the website and see what is in the archival collection.

In support of this funding I spoke before committees in both the House and Senate and it is truly amazing how much support we have from legislators of both parties from all over the state. What I try to emphasize to legislators and to groups I talk to is the Minnesota Military Museum is Minnesota's Military Museum. We are the largest and the most diverse and the goal is to have people think of us first when they think military museum in Minnesota.

Doug Bekke and the curatorial staff and volunteers have been working very hard to prepare for the opening of the new "Minnesota Voices from the Vietnam War" exhibit and I want to encourage all of you to attend the opening on July 18 or to make it a point to visit after it is opened. Doug will provide more details on the exhibit in his column; however, please help us spread the word about this great exhibit.

Enjoy your summer and please make the time for a visit to the museum with friends and family.

CURATOR'S NOTES

By Doug Bekke



On May 1st the museum opened its updated and expanded "Women in the Military" exhibit. The change was long overdue. New LED lights were installed, the exhibit-viewing field was almost doubled, and many more artifacts from WWI to the present time were put on display. The great frustration with this exhibit, as with so many others, is that there is so much good material and not enough space to show it off.

For years we have been hoping to restore many of the wooden spoke wheel artifacts in the museum and several things are finally coming to fruition. Two WWI trench mortars are in the final phase of restoration after nearly three years of work. Then, about a month ago, wheels for the museum's WWI 10.5cm Howitzer arrived from the wheelwright in Michigan. They had been under construction for over a year. At the same time we shipped out the deteriorated wheels from the WWI 10.5cm howitzer for rebuilding. With help

from some of Camp Ripley's great troops and our wonderful volunteers, we able to put the wheels on the gun and move it into a new workshop space where restoration of the actual gun can be accomplished. Finally sitting properly on its massive wood and steel wheels is an impressive sight. Three other guns and a M1917 US ammunition wagon were also moved into the new shop where restoration work can begin. Hopefully all this work will be completed by the start of the 2016 museum summer season, or at latest by the opening of our new WWI exhibit in July of 2016. As always, we have received great post support. Many thanks to the Camp Ripley staff, carpenters, and electricians for support and for their work on the two buildings (converted tin huts, used for officer's quarters). Both buildings are currently to be used as workshops, but by next summer one will become a cannon exhibit space.

On Saturday, July 18, the museum will open a new special exhibit, "Minnesota Voices of the Vietnam War." I have spent much of the last year collecting stories from Minnesota veterans, and these stories will be the heart of the exhibit. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, men and women, are all included. It has personally been a very interesting experience collecting and comparing these stories with my own memories and experiences in Vietnam. The special Mobile Riverine Force Association traveling exhibit will also visit the museum for our opening. We are especially hoping that many Vietnam veterans can attend.

ALLIES**OUT OF THE ARCHIVES**

By Chad Conrady



I am continuing to process Adjutant General's Office records and assorted collections of movie film that have been kept at the museum. The Adjutant General's Office records I have most recently arranged and re-housed are of the times when the Minnesota National Guard was reorganized or going through big changes, covering the years from 1944 to 1992. In this record set, the most resource rich subjects or time periods

are the reorganization directly after World War Two, the proposal by the Department of Defense to merge the Army Reserve and the National Guard in the early to mid-1960s, and the establishment of the Select Reserve Force (SRF) during the Vietnam War. The SRF was designed to dramatically increase mobilization readiness of particular "selected" Guard units. Of these three, the most controversial was the proposed merging of the Army Reserve into the National Guard. Intended as a way to reform and streamline the nation's reserve forces, the plan included inactivation of several Guard divisions. When Minnesota's Adjutant General, Chester J. Moeglein, learned of this possibility in the early 1960s he sent a flurry of letters

to Minnesota's Congressional delegation in Washington, DC to express his deep concerns. As it turned out, widespread opposition, and the turmoil it might bring at a time of war, prompted Congress to expressly forbid the merger in 1966.

The other series of records that have also been arranged and re-housed are the federal induction and recognition records. The oldest federal recognition records that I came across date back to 1919 when the Minnesota National Guard was being reconstituted following World War One, and up to about 1947/1948 for the post World War Two reorganization. As for the federal induction records, the bulk of these are from when the 47th Division was activated during the Korean War and sent to Camp Rucker.

Inspecting, cleaning, and re-housing the film collections has been full of surprises, I have been able to identify a number of films of Camp Ripley in the 1930s, Minnesota National Guard recruiting films from the 1970s, and a collection taken by a GI, presumably with the 28th Infantry Division, from when he landed in Normandy to when he and his unit was in Luxemburg, including a segment when he was on leave in Paris. The films of Camp Ripley include a film of the 109th Observation Squadron participating in annual training with a visit from a pursuit squadron flying P-26s, and a Camp Ripley visitors' day in 1934 showing the different events, including chariot races with soldiers pulling the carts. Other films of Camp Ripley include a military parade of the 59th Field Artillery Brigade and the 135th Infantry Regiment from 1935, and the 1935 field training exercises of the 206th Infantry Regiment.

Activities mark opening of new Vietnam Exhibit on July 18

A new special exhibit, "Minnesota Voices from the Vietnam War" will commemorate 50 years since the start of major US combat operations in that country. Using artifacts, words, and photographs, a series of stories will be told about Minnesota veterans who were involved in that conflict—from the end of WWII when a Minnesota member of an OSS Operational Team parachuted into Hanoi—to 1975 when the 9-year old son of a Vietnamese officer was evacuated by helicopter from our embassy—to the 1980s and '90s when Gen. John Vessey worked on MIA recovery. Curator Doug Bekke notes that "The exhibit will focus on more than just combat. It will also portray the stories of mechanics, cooks, clerks, logisticians and support troops from all branches." The exhibit will include a brief overview of the history of Vietnam and the rise of Ho Chi Minh and a Vietnam War timeline.

The exhibit officially opens on Saturday, July 18. A formal program begins at 11 a.m. with guest speakers, including General Vessey, and presentations. There will be food, "try on" equipment displays, and period reenactors. Vets who have written books about their Vietnam War ex-

periences will be available for book signings. A traveling exhibit sponsored by the Mobile Riverine Force Association will also be open for viewing.

Museum goes wireless

Wireless WiFi is now available at the museum, enabling us to enrich the museum experience for visitors who use mobile devices. For example, you can now play an interactive game (History Hero) dealing with artifacts on display, and scan QR codes sprinkled throughout the museum to supplement exhibit storylines. Visitors who relish a challenge along with some fun can download History Hero from the iTunes App Store or Google Play. This free, downloadable, interactive game for use in the museum on a smart phone or tablet is a 20-question quiz for budding history champions. It can be downloaded on-site with the museum's free WiFi connection.

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SPOTLIGHTED RECENT DONATIONS



For years I've sought to improve the museum's collection of Vietnam War artifacts. Not many came back or were kept by the veterans. A few days ago Mike Mykulak brought over an outstanding group of things that he received years ago from Lt. Gary Pennebaker. Gary was a Special Forces officer in the MIKE Force, an elite reaction force. Gary passed away last winter and Mike thought it was a good idea to get Gary's military belongings to a safe, permanent home. We were very pleased to receive Gary's jungle fatigues, dress blues, greens, tiger stripe fatigues, MIKE Force insignia, newspaper clipping about his combat engagements, and related materials. Everything is exactly as Gary wore it in Vietnam or, in the case of the greens, just as he wore them home from Vietnam.

On the same day Jim Sullivan brought over his Vietnam photo album and some other things that give more meaning to the jungle fatigue jacket and artifacts he donated way back in 1991. Jim left Vietnam in mid-1972 after serving in the 1st Cav. He was one of the last combat troops to leave.

Instagram Photo Contest announced

Visitors are encouraged this summer to take selfies and record their fun as part of a photo contest. Share the photos using Instagram and post them at #MnMilitaryMuseumPhotoContest2015 between May 1 and September 1. Prizes will be awarded to the visitor with the most "likes" and also for the most creative selfie.

You can download the free Instagram app from the iTunes App Store or Google Play.



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It was a BIG Weekend

Over 2400 Scouts and Scouters passed through the museum's doors May 15-17 and uncounted more just explored the grounds, clambering over tracked vehicles, peering into aircraft, and taking turns in the tank turret trainer. It was the 2015 Area-Wide Ripley Rendezvous, a Boy Scout mega-camporee that happens every four years. Thousands of Scouts from five states and parts of Canada converged on Camp Ripley for an activity-packed weekend that kept museum staff and volunteers hopping for three straight days.

Boys will be boys.

(Photo courtesy
Brainerd Dispatch)

