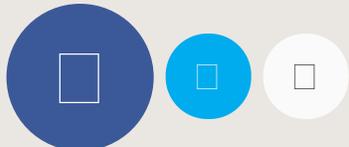


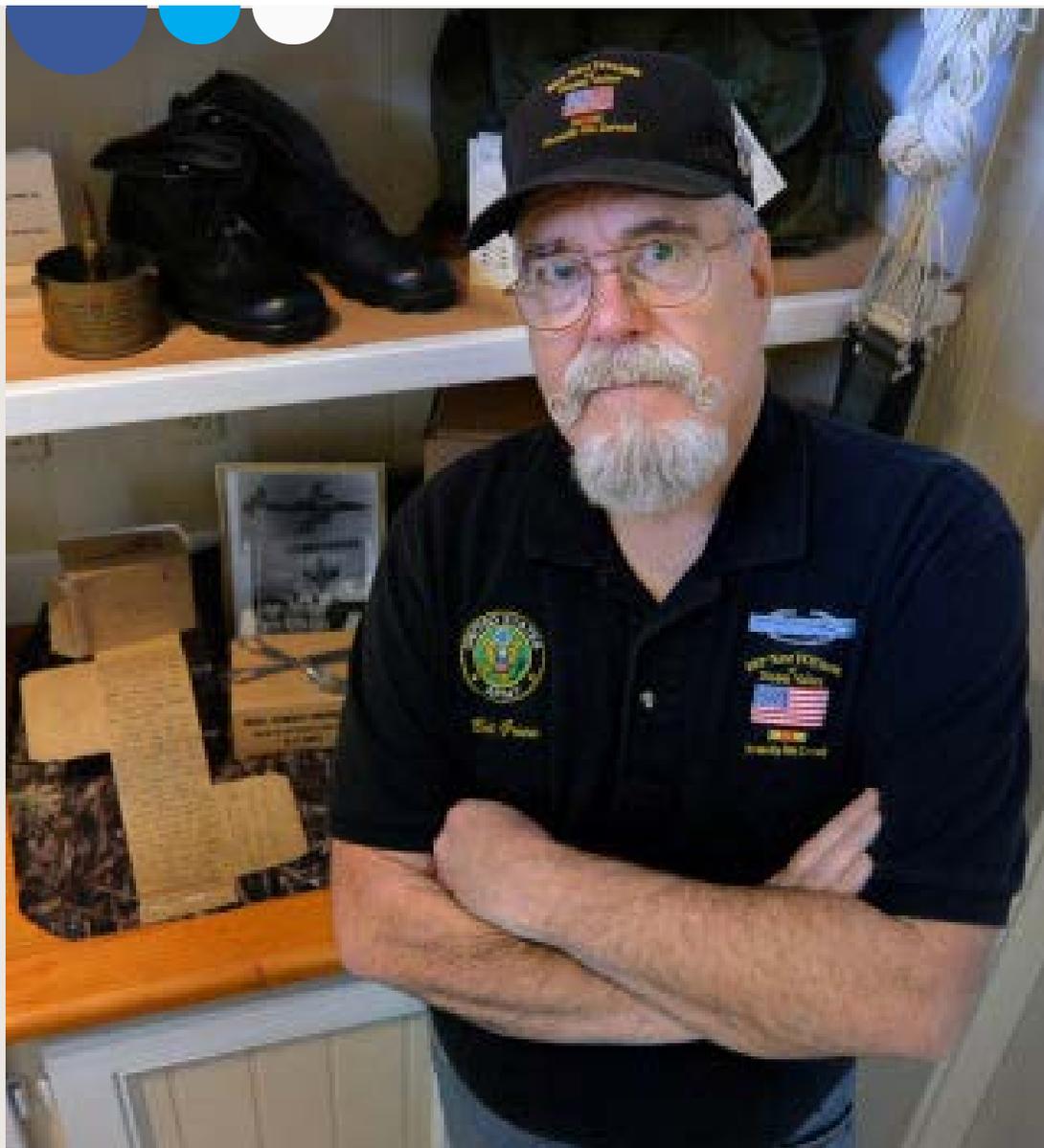


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Community News

# Danville museum exhibits wars' letters home





Doug Duran/staff

Vietnam War veteran Bill Green, of Alamo, on Thursday stands next to a letter he wrote on a cardboard box while serving in Vietnam that is on display at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley in Danville. Green's letter and other items from local veterans are part of the traveling exhibition "War Comes Home: The Legacy."

By **BETH JENSEN** |

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*"The main issue for me has been adjusting to a life without the dear friends I served with and whom I grew to love — and, without whom, I felt alone and unable to relate to others. I am told this is normal. That did not, however, make it easier. And I know I'm doing better than many for whom I care deeply. They hide it well, but they are struggling ... I pray that they*

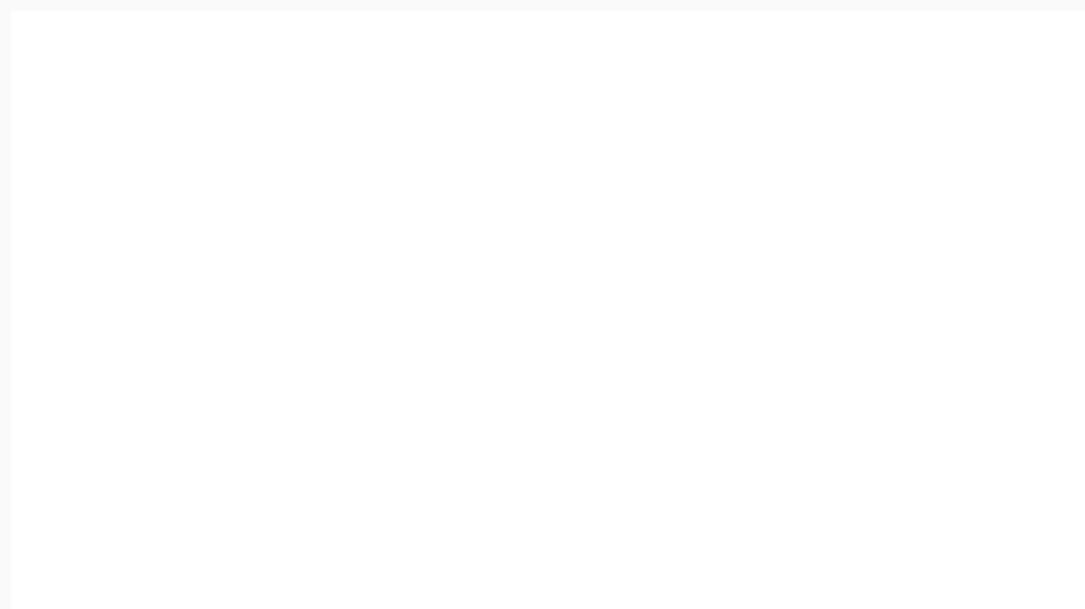
*will find someone they can confide in and unload this burden so that the pain they carry with them is lessened over time. My writing gave me an outlet while I was over there, and it continues to help me now.”*

— a letter home from Staff Sgt. Parker Gyokeres, Iraq War veteran

The letters are sweet, frightened, anguished, angry – even funny. Some are written in the formal and flowery language and penmanship of the 19th century, while others were delivered as email. All are deeply personal.

The wartime letters are the soul of “War Comes Home: The Legacy,” on exhibit at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley, 205 Railroad Ave. in Danville through April 9. The exhibit is part of Cal Humanities’ “War Comes Home” initiative, a program designed to promote greater understanding of veterans and to explore how war shapes a community.

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The letters on display were written during the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam and the more recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The exhibit consists of 12 large panels showcasing writing from the battlefield, along with narratives to provide context. Visitors will be able to use their mobile phones or on-site MP3 players to access recordings of the letters performed by professional actors or, in some

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cases, the author of the letter. The museum will also feature a display of wartime memorabilia on loan from local collections, along with a series of evening programs on related topics.

The exhibit is an unusually personal look at war through the intimate thoughts of individuals. In one haunting letter, famed Civil War nurse Clara Barton reflects on the deaths to come the following day in an 1862 letter written on the eve of the Battle of Fredericksburg. In another, a 15-year-old boy fighting in Korea writes to beg his mother to contact the recruiting board and tell them he lied about his age. Some writers say the war has changed them and worry whether they'll still be loved and accepted at home.

“A lot of times we get the historical nature of warfare ... this is what happened, this is the casualty list, and you sometimes lose track of the people,” said Dan Dunn, executive director of the museum. “This comes from completely the opposite end. You may know about this battle or not ... but it doesn't matter much. It's the content of people's thoughts that are here instead of numbers and dates.”

The exhibit is based on the collection at the Center for American War Letters, located at Chapman University in Orange, near Santa Ana. The show is co-curated by historian and best-selling author Andrew Carroll, along with John Benitz, chair of the Department of Theater at the university and director of the acclaimed play “If All the Sky Were Paper,” a drama written by Carroll on the wartime experience based on letters from service members.

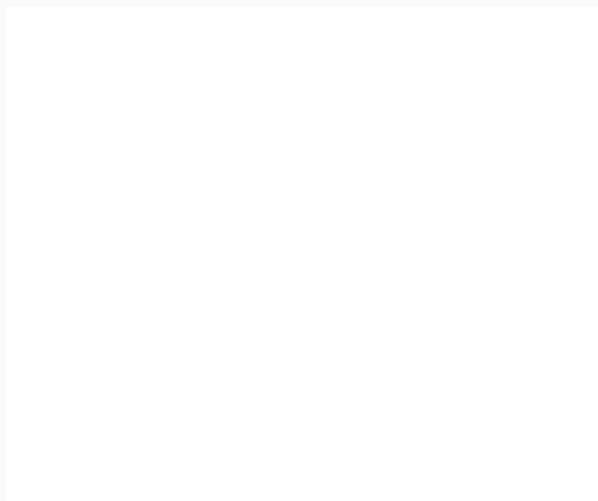
“The letters drew me to the (exhibit) project,” Benitz said. “The very personal nature of these letters. These people are often on the front lines expressing themselves with no filter. It's not a playwright reinterpreting the voice — this is their voice. They're absolutely beautiful through the pain or surprisingly humorous and surprisingly optimistic considering what we know was happening at the time. This humanity is shining through.”

Vietnam veteran Bill Green, of Alamo, contributed some of his correspondence to the exhibit. His began his service as a 20-year-old infantry point man, eventually rising to sergeant and squad leader. He was

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wounded twice — once by a booby-trap spear and later by shrapnel from a grenade. He wrote home constantly, but the dampness and humidity of Vietnam caused writing paper to disintegrate, so he and his buddies had to get creative.



“The old guys taught the new guys to take a C-ration box that our food came in, cut the box open, write in the interior and then fold it up to about the size of a letter,” he explained. “We’d gather them up when the helicopter came in to resupply our food. We’d give them to the door gunner, who always had a sack. They were like our mailmen.”

Green began his 1968 service with a group of 10 men. Seven of them never completed their tour, due to injury or death. Handwritten mail was a lifeline, he said.

“You treasured those letters because they came from the real world, not from where we were,” he recalled. “I read them and burned them; I didn’t want to leave anything for the enemy.”

There was one thing Green could never write home about, however.

“Anything but the combat I was in,” he said. “I might talk about what I saw that day, creatures in the jungle; anything but the combat.”

The exhibit offers a rare glimpse into the personal lives of the men and women who lived through war but struggled to describe it in writing, said Benitz.

“What transcends all the letters is often some humor that really catches you off-guard, a hopefulness and the humanity in them,” he said. “One thing I can say with all truthfulness and clarity is the horror of war is almost impossible to express. Those who’ve been there and truly witnessed it all come to the same conclusion ... it’s a shared experience with no words to truly express how awful it is.”

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## From the Front Lines

*“I thought I could hear the slow flap of the grim messenger’s wings as one by one he sought and selected his victims for the morning sacrifice. Sleep weary one, sleep and rest for tomorrow’s toil. Oh! Sleep and visit in dreams once more the loved ones nestling at home.”*

— Civil War nurse Clara Barton to her cousin Vira on the eve of the Battle of Fredericksburg, 2 a.m. Dec. 12. 1862.

*So if I ever get home I’ll know there’s one place waiting for me — my corner of the world. Let it be a small alcove in your heart. Put a comfortable chair there and always keep a warm fire glowing. That’s my home with you.*

— 2nd Lt. Sidney Diamond writing to his fiancée, Estelle, from the South Pacific, Dec. 25, 1944. Diamond was killed less than a month later on Luzon in the Philippines.

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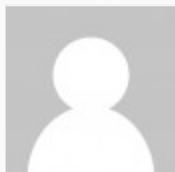
## At a Glance

“War Comes Home: The Legacy” is on exhibit at the Museum of the San Ramon Valley through April 9. The museum is located at 205 Railroad Ave. in Danville. Hours are 1 to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday and noon to 3 p.m. Sunday. Admission is free for members, \$5 for adults, \$3 for seniors and \$3 for students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

For more information, contact the museum at 925-837-3750 or log on to [museumsrv.org](http://museumsrv.org). For more information on the Center for American War

Letters, log on to <http://www.chapman.edu/research-and-institutions/cawl/index.aspx>.

Tags: [Military](#), [Museums](#)

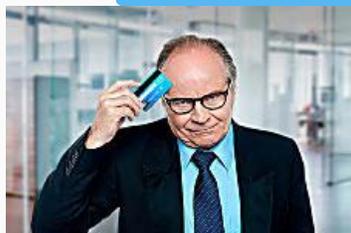


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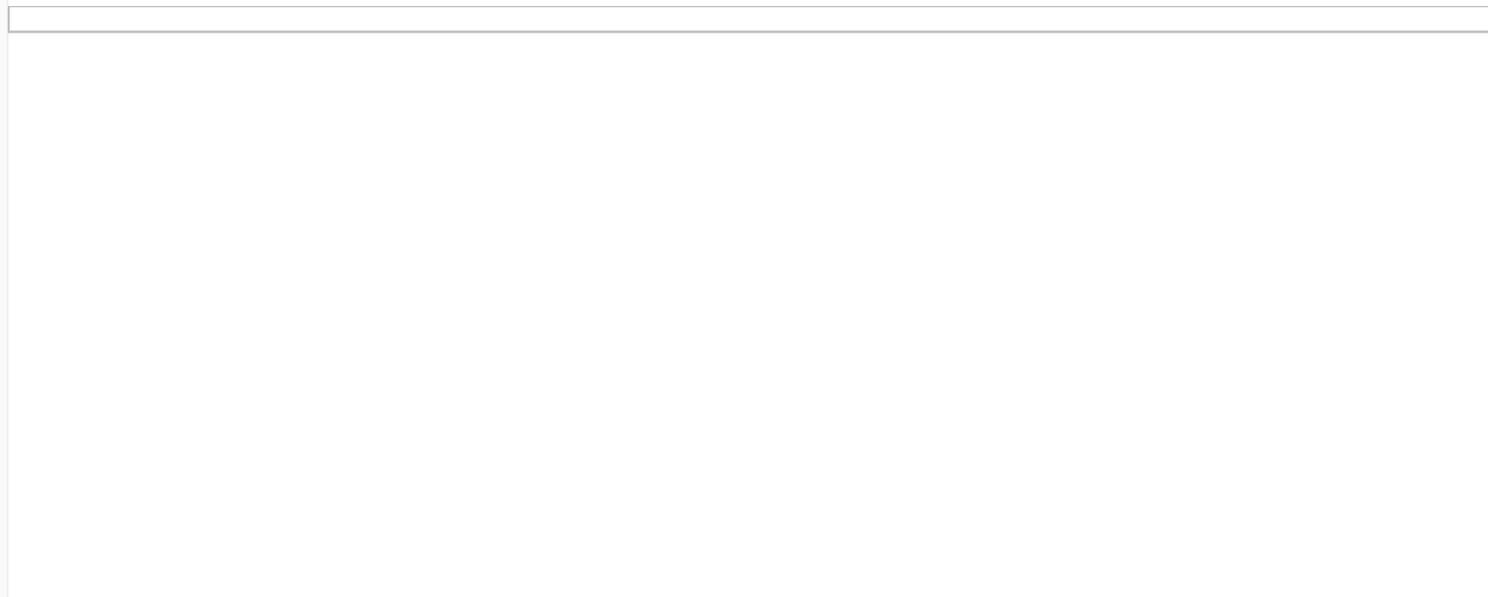


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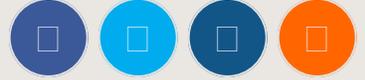
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