



Dan Starks, founder of the National Museum of Military Vehicles, stands next to the first fully operational Sherman tank that he purchased to drive in the Dubois, Wyo., Independence Day Parade. The \$100 million facility currently houses military vehicles from World War II through the Vietnam War.

# NEW \$100 MILLION NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MILITARY VEHICLES HONORS VETERANS

A private collection of military vehicles has turned into a full-scale museum in Wyoming. The man behind it says he does it to honor veterans' sacrifices to America, to preserve history and educate others.

**BY DAVE SPIVA**

**M**ore than 11 years ago, Dan Starks found himself in a position to purchase an M4 Sherman tank. The tank had been abandoned as a target on a Virginia shooting range in the 1950s.

"It was completely rusted out," Starks said. "There was no floor. If someone had climbed in the hatch, then they would fall out of the bottom. No engine, no transmission — just a rusted-out hulk."

Even with the tank's major flaws, Starks decided to buy it for \$50,000. He believed he would be able to salvage and fully restore the tank.

"My goal was to make it completely functional," Stark said. "I wanted everything to work except for the cannon."

### TO HONOR VETERANS

Once the tank was finished, Starks had the idea to drive it in the Dubois, Wyo., Fourth of July Parade. Little did he know, the tank would take eight years to fully restore.

"I got impatient four years into the process," Starks said and laughed. "It was moving at a snail's pace. I wanted to drive the tank in tribute to veterans."

Out of frustration, Starks decided to purchase another Sherman that was fully operable to be able to drive through Dubois' Ramshorn Road in the patriotic parade. That tank cost him \$500,000.

At that point in 2014, Starks purchased other World War II-era military vehicles for his private collection and had a total of seven vehicles ready for Dubois' 2014 Independence Day celebration.

"During the parade, I remember driving along the route and hearing a lot of honking outside," Starks said. "I came out of the hatch to see what was going on, and I saw this senior citizen, who no doubt was a WWII veteran, in his pickup truck honking its horn."

Starks said it was "wonderfully gratifying" to see and hear the reaction of those who were witnessing the Independence Day parade. He said he has been thanked many times for

bringing a Sherman tank to a town of a little less than 1,000 people.

"People have said they would have never gotten a chance to see one if it wasn't for that," Starks said.

By 2015, Starks owned eight military vehicles. Through the next several years, Starks purchased even more vehicles — jeeps, tanks, trucks, pickups and motorcycles. He bought military weapons — artillery, rifles and guns. He also bought amphibious landing crafts.

Today, Starks has enough military vehicles and weapons of war to fill a museum. And more.

### TO EDUCATE THE PUBLIC

Last year, Starks opened the National Museum of Military Vehicles, located about eight miles southeast of Dubois on U.S. Highway 26. The museum, which displays about 200 vehicles, is housed in a 140,000-square-foot-building.

Starks is the sole investor of the property and collection. He made his fortune in the medical device industry.

Starks said he wanted to create the National Museum of Military Vehicles for three reasons — to honor the service and sacrifice of the nation's veterans and their families, educate future generations on the history of American freedom and preserve and share historic military vehicles.

"I wanted a place where we can teach school children and the public at-large about the service and sacrifice of our veterans," Starks said. "The civilian-veterans relationship is very important to have. We need to help veterans tell their stories because they cannot do it themselves without our help."

Starks, who isn't a veteran himself, said he has a close friend who served in combat in the Vietnam War.

"I heard these

stories about his time in Vietnam, and I had become fascinated by the Vietnam War experience," Starks said. "After getting some insight from him about the war, I read every single non-fiction Vietnam War book I could get my hands on. At one point, I couldn't find any more to read."

Starks also has a family connection to the military. His father served as an officer in the Navy in WWII.

"Ever since I could first read, I was fascinated with American military history," Starks said. "I haven't lost that. I would say I have an unusual amount of passion for military history."

### 'TO PRESERVE AND SHARE' HISTORY

The National Museum of Military Vehicles, a \$100 million venture located near Jackson Hole and Yellowstone National Park, continues to be built. On Memorial Day weekend, the museum opened new Korean War and Vietnam War exhibits.

Starks' daughter, Alynne Catron, is the executive director of the National Museum of Military Vehicles. She said she enjoys her work at the museum and that many museum staff members are military veterans.

"I love working with veterans," Catron said. "It's very rewarding. I see how passionate they are about their work, which makes me even more passionate about the museum. It's easy to come on to a project like this and make sure it's successful and running smoothly, but I always remember why I'm here. I'm here to

#### OTHER VENTURES FOR VETERANS

Besides the National Museum of Military Vehicles, Dan Starks has been involved with other veteran-centered projects.

In 2009, Starks founded American Shooters, a shooting range located in Las Vegas. His idea was to own a business that would help transition veterans into civilian life. His son-in-law, Mick Catron, is the president of the business.

Starks and Catron also were instrumental in the creation of the Nevada State Veterans Memorial located north of downtown Las Vegas. The two-acre memorial features 10 statues depicting military service members through America's history, according to the Nevada Department of Veterans Services website.



### HONORING LANCE CPL. CHANCE PHELPS

The National Military Vehicles Museum near Dubois, Wyo., has a theater named for a hometown Marine who died in Iraq in 2004.

MARINE CORPS PHOTO



Lance Cpl. Chance Phelps

Marine Pfc. Chance Phelps, who served with 2nd Plt., Battery L, 3rd Bn., 11th Marines, was killed in the Iraq War on April 9, 2004, during a convoy escort, which included then-Brig. Gen. John Kelly. Phelps was 19 years old.

After the convoy was attacked and Phelps was wounded, he manned a machine gun to cover for the evacuation of the rest of his convoy. He received a posthumous promotion to lance corporal and received the Bronze Star after his death.

Phelps' remains were buried in a cemetery in Dubois, where he received full military honors.

An account of Phelps' death was turned into an HBO movie called "Taking Chance." The movie, starring Kevin Bacon as Marine Corps Col. Michael Strobl, was released in 2009. The screenplay was written by Strobl and director Ross Katz. The movie was about Strobl's account of escorting the remains of Phelps back home. Bacon received a Golden Globe award for the role.

make sure we honor veterans."

Her husband, Mick, served as an Army Green Beret in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Mick is the president and chairman of American Shooters in Las Vegas (see sidebar) and a member of VFW Post 12101 in Henderson, Nev.

VFW Department of Wyoming Commander Jim Rish visited the

Kampuchea (Cambodia), and the rescue mission resulted in the 41 KIAs and wounded 50 other U.S. troops.

Last year, the Department's midwinter conference took place in Dubois. Rish said that Starks invited all the conference attendees to the National Museum of Military Vehicles.

"Dan was still working on the muse-

ABOVE: Patrons of the National Museum of Military Vehicles observe the World War II Battle of the Bulge exhibit. The museum, located near Dubois, Wyo., displays about 200 vehicles in a 140,000-square-foot building.

um then, but we were absolutely blown away by what he already had set up," Rish said. "It's even greater now. He has given back to veterans something that will keep giving to future generations."

Rish, a Vietnam War Air Force veteran, said he was "absolutely" impressed with the attention to detail that was given at every exhibit of the museum.

"The other thing that was as impressive as the museum was Dan's knowledge of military history," Rish said. "He was our tour guide, and he knows everything about past wars. He doesn't read off a script, either."

The museum currently has fully restored vehicles from WWII through the Vietnam War. Starks said he hopes to expand the museum in the future.

"We still haven't even had our grand opening," Starks said. "We are just getting started."

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