

# Liberation Pavilion Review: The American Pursuit of Peace

A new exhibit hall and theater at the National WWII Museum in New Orleans focuses on the conclusion of World War II and the ensuing efforts to promote peace and freedom around the world.

*By  
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Installation view of the remains crate of Army Pfc. Gerald Williams PHOTO: NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM

New Orleans

There is much to celebrate in the Liberation Pavilion, the National WWII Museum's newest exhibit hall and theater, which opened earlier this month. Its 33,610-square-foot space spans three floors, 13 galleries, and tells two intertwined stories: the human cost of

concluding what the museum calls “the most destructive war in human history” and our postwar efforts to promote peace and freedom at home and abroad.

While it’s all told well through more than 300 artifacts, 71 oral histories and 13 media displays, what is most notable about the pavilion is its unabashed narrative that the Allies, particularly the Americans, were the good guys. It’s somewhat remarkable that in 2023, amid all our social upheavals and gnashing of teeth, there’s a place that still celebrates all that we did. And lest you think this is some patriotic whitewash of history, the museum does not shy away from pointing out our own shortcomings, specifically the internment of Japanese-Americans and the fact that African-Americans who fought bravely in a war to free the world came back to the Jim Crow South of whites-only water fountains and bathrooms.

World War II’s human cost is the defining theme of “Finding Hope in a World Destroyed,” the first-floor galleries dedicated to the tragedy of the war. We’re told that 65 million soldiers and civilians were killed from the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939 to the Japanese surrender in August 1945. That’s roughly 27,000 people a day. About 415,000 of the war dead were Americans, including Army Pfc. Gerald Williams, killed in action in Germany on Jan. 15, 1945. In 1949, his remains were shipped home to his wife, Bernice, in Lorain, Ohio, in a wooden crate, on display here. There are also photos of emaciated American POWs; of those held by the Japanese, 40% died. In a nearby display case is a violin made of bed slats, table legs and aid cartons, put together by First Lt. Clair Cline, a pilot who was held at Stalag Luft I in Germany.

The first floor grows even more somber as visitors enter the galleries that, with their dark walls and subdued lighting, detail the horrors of the Holocaust. There’s a timeline that traces the rise of European antisemitism, the pogroms, the mandatory yellow-cloth Stars of David, and the eventual deportation to the death camps. The displays are unflinching in chronicling the systematic murder of Jews, punctuated by the stories of survivors told through interactive kiosks. There are also tearful remembrances of what it meant to see Allied soldiers come through the camp gates.



Exhibit on the four Chaplains of the Dorchester PHOTO: NATIONAL WWII MUSEUM

Leaving the Holocaust gallery that documents religious persecution, visitors walk into one celebrating the religious faith of the combatants. Amid pocket Bibles and portable Mass kits, visitors learn the story of four Army chaplains who were on the Dorchester when it was torpedoed in the North Atlantic in February 1943. They selflessly gave away their lifejackets to save others, “linked arms, sang hymns, and prayed in English, Hebrew and Latin” before they all drowned.

The next gallery tells the story of the Monuments Men and Women, art professionals who, as members of the armed forces, rescued and cataloged what the museum calls “the greatest art theft in history.” Some 3.5 million objects were eventually recovered, but roughly 700,000 are still missing. On display here—in a faux cave to simulate the salt mines in Germany and Austria where the Nazis hid the stolen artworks taken from museums and Jewish homes across Continental Europe—is a map of hiding places, as well as picture frames with digital images of some of the stolen masterpieces; among those looted were works by Raphael, Manet and Degas.

While the first floor is dark and haunting, the second-floor galleries, “Forces of Freedom at Home and Abroad (1945-Present),” not only celebrate the joys of coming home to family and a prosperous America, but also the very real business of securing the hard-fought

freedoms won in World War II. The first order of business was holding the German and Japanese leadership accountable for the unjust war they had waged, especially against civilians. There are photos, archival materials, and touchscreens that let you hear from the witnesses and defendants in the war-crimes trials. Most fascinating is the actual execution hood worn by Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo when he was hanged.

The museum also explains how military technology was adapted to civilian applications. For example, the German Me 262, the first fighter jet, spurred commercial air travel. The walkie-talkies used to communicate on the battlefield eventually led to the cellphone.

Most important here is the civil-rights gallery, which explains that Rosa Parks was a defense worker during the war and could go places most civilians of any race couldn't, but still had to ride at the back of the bus. There's also a Torah, buried in a Berlin cemetery at the start of the war. It was dug up in 1945 and used for some of the first postwar Jewish ceremonies in Germany.

The exhibits conclude on the third floor with a film that takes visitors from 1918 to today, looking at what led to World War II, how it was fought and won, and how our victory shaped the postwar world. Again, like much of the rest of the museum, the film emphasizes the freedoms we defended, and how we tried to live up to those ideals at home. Now, more than ever, we need to be reminded of that history.

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