

Memories Drive Artistic Work of Visual Information Specialist

by Richard Williamson
Public Affairs Officer

Twenty-eight years ago during a WestPac cruise, the stress level aboard the USS Ramsey was intense. Paul Bouchard and his shipmates were staring out at what looked like the dark eyes of a Soviet heavy cruiser's multiple gun barrels off the coast of Siberia.

Two weeks ago, in a much less stressful situation in Chicago, he was staring out at the eyes of many smiling faces celebrating an art museum to display Vietnam era veterans work.

The connection between the two involves an interest in art, Naval service during the Vietnam War and Delayed Stress Syndrome. And of course, Paul Bouchard.

Paul didn't start out 39 years ago with a plan to be an artist producing work inspired by the stress of his service off the coast of Vietnam, China, and Russia. But those events coupled with his artistic interests combined to produce more than 200 pieces of art work.

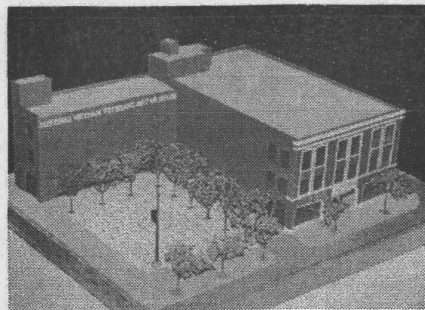
It really all began when Paul was about 11 and living in Torrance. His fifth-grade teacher noticed his fledgling abilities and recommended he get some art training. Paul attended programs at the City of Torrance Parks and Recreation Department. He continued his studies at Redondo Union High School and went on to El Camino College and Chouinard private art college (where lots of Disney animators have studied).

Like many students, Paul joined the Naval Reserve to serve his country and be able to continue his advanced study. He served one year in the Reserve where he attended meetings and two years of active duty. His service as a boatswain's mate took him to the

coast of South Vietnam onboard the USS Ramsey (DEG-2) — a guided missile destroyer escort — performing electronic surveillance duty.

"We were as close to the coast of Vietnam as the flagpole is to the lake," Paul said. "I never set foot on Vietnam itself, but saw a lot of coastline."

"Our job was very stressful," Paul said. "Our mission was to probe the other side's electronic emissions and see if we could provoke them into sending out more signals we could capture. It reminds me of the 1965 movie — Bedford Incident," he added. That movie "There wasn't any shooting — just lots of stress."



The capture of the USS Pueblo by North Korea was well known and on everyone's mind during that cruise according to Paul.

"When I came back, I wanted to be a sculptor," Paul said. "I went to work at the Long Beach Naval Shipyard as a welder apprentice. After I was injured, I went to work at Edwards Air Force Base as an illustrator doing helicopters, and viewgraphs of the



Paul Bouchard stands beside Flag #7 — a watercolor on paper artwork about 40 inches tall by 30 inches wide at the Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. Photo by Jane Vernon

space shuttle for the Army Aviation Engineering Flight Activity."

"When the Russians invaded Afghanistan, there was an incident that triggered delayed stress," Paul said. "I started doing watercolors of anonymous flags but didn't know why (this subject). Then I heard about Delayed Stress Syndrome," and he made the connection between his creative and cognitive processes.

Paul started doing the flags in 1979. "I had a compulsion to do them," he said. He took some of his art to a gallery in San Francisco to see if they might be interested in his work. But it really took someone else to realize what was happening in his art. Leslie Freeland curated — *Healing the Wounds* — a Vietnam Veterans Art show that ran for more than four years in California.

"Most of my art seems to have fragments of culture or fragments of society as a theme," Paul added.

Before flying to Chicago, Paul completed a solo exhibit at the Grants Pass, Oregon Fire House Gallery where he had 12 paintings on exhibit. His work there had been in a traveling show for more than 10 years when Chicago Mayor Richard Daley saw the show and liked it so much he got a 30,000 square-foot former factory building donated along with \$1,000,000 to fix it up for a Vietnam Veterans Art Museum.

"The museum isn't officially open," Paul said. "The third floor is still in renovation. But with the help of volunteers and Chicago unions, the first two floors were renovated in about four months — in time for a celebration and preview the last week of August," he said.

Today, several of his works are on display in permanent collections in Australia and around the United States. Three are in Chicago. Paul also has art in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Oakland Art Museum in the Rental and Sales Galleries.



Paul Bouchard, artist Bob Bono, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and artist Ned Brodrick share a moment at the new Vietnam Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. The museum features more than 500 works of art created by veterans from all nations participating in the war (including North and South Vietnam).

Photo by Jane Vernon