

Armed Forces History Museum in Largo to close in January

LARGO — John Piazza Sr. first became interested in collecting military artifacts when he received a gift, a World War I German mortar from a friend's father.

That was more than 60 years ago. Before he died in October, his collection had grown to include items large and small — countless weapons, from bows and arrows to sticky bombs and flamethrowers, a uniform worn by Saddam Hussein, a Russian MiG-21 supersonic fighter jet, an M8 Greyhound and a World War II reconnaissance tank. It had grown so big that in 2008 Piazza established the nonprofit Armed Forces Military Museum, to share his collection with the public.

Since then, tourists, families, veterans and students, about 25,000 people each year, have made their way into the museum, housed in former warehouse space off Ulmerton Road.

But no more.

On Wednesday, officials announced that the museum, renamed in 2012 as the Armed Forces History Museum, will close its doors at the end of January. Assistant executive director Cindy Dion said the museum has operated in the red since it opened, but Piazza had covered the deficit until his death.

Dion said that in the coming weeks the board of directors will explore possibilities of how to continue sharing the museum's contents with the public, while acknowledging that to move it would cost upwards of \$7 million.

"We are hoping this is our Hail Mary pass," she said. "That somebody out there will stand up and say, 'No way. This can't happen.' "

Dion acknowledged that the location played a factor in the financial struggles.

"It is very difficult when you are not in the public eye to draw attention," she said. "I also think that having a military niche is very narrow. There is (only) a certain amount of people interested in the military. It is not as broad as an aquarium or zoo, embraced by many people."

Largo Mayor Woody Brown said the closing would be unfortunate.

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"I understand it had a lack of visibility, and the city worked with them to help with signage," he said. "Most people that are involved with the museum would love to see it continue, but I'm not sure what organization would be able to take it up (the operation of the museum). I'm planning on meeting with a board member in a week or so to put our heads together to see if there's anything that can be done."

David Miller, a Vietnam combat veteran and the American Legion's national hospital representative with the Bay Pines VA Healthcare System, was surprised to hear the news.

"I am disappointed," he said. "It's become a gathering place for veterans, but the greater loss will be for our future generations to understand what veterans do, the education element. The museum has become a major educational center. No place does it better."

With its paid staff of seven and team of about 30 regular volunteers, the museum will operate under its regular schedule through Jan. 29.

For information, go online to armedforcesmuseum.com.

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<http://web.tampabay.com/news/business/armed-forces-history-museum-in-largo-to-close-in-january/2304578>

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<http://www.abcactionnews.com/news/hillsborough-regional-news/the-armed-forces-history-museum-set-to-close-after-financial-problems>

Best,

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