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A peaceful walk around the Art of War on Norfolk's waterfront

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The Battleship Wisconsin, one of the largest and last battleships built by the U.S. Navy, is berthed at Nauticus, an exciting interactive science and technology center.

A letter can be a form of emotional triage and a bittersweet gift.

Private First Class Johnny Paul Price had just dodged a hail of Viet Cong gunfire that had felled his fellow soldiers. That day in 1966, he braved more firestorms to fetch medics for five men barely clinging to life. Thanks to Price, they survived.

He did not; a bullet to the back capped his life at 21 years. Found in his pocket was a letter to his mother. “We were receiving murderous fire from both sides,” he’d written on a thin sheet of paper. “I carry all your letters in the top of my helmet. Don’t worry. ...”

His mother received the letter and kept it close for decades. Now, I’m reading its words in a bronze reproduction on a wharf in Norfolk, Virginia, as terns fly overhead and breezes ripple the Elizabeth River.

Twenty such letters form the Armed Forces Memorial in Town Point Park. Scattered by a flagpole, appearing to be blown by river breezes, the letters date back to the Revolutionary War. They express love, fear, faith and courage. The day before Lt. Frances Y. Slinger died, the WWII nurse wrote of wounded soldiers: “Somebody’s brothers, somebody’s fathers, somebody’s sons.” Another letter-writer, Union Private Lyons Wakeman, fought to the death in the Civil War — before being revealed as Sarah Rosetta, disguised as a man.

This is one of many artful memorials in Norfolk. Established four centuries ago, this port city at the junction of the

Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean is home to the world's largest naval base. And military-themed art and artifacts along the recently extended Elizabeth River Trail include a propeller that is 20 feet in diameter and weighs 17,330 pounds, and "The Homecoming," a larger-than-life-size U.S. Navy sailor reuniting with his family. The statue was dedicated the week USS Cole crew members returned to Norfolk after terrorists attacked in Yemen.

Facing the waterside Nautilus museum is "The Lone Sailor." This tribute was created by Stanley Bleifeld, the U.S. Navy Memorial's official sculptor. He mixed bronze with artifacts from eight U.S. Navy ships. The most commanding view is the Battleship Wisconsin (BB-64), among the largest and last U.S. Navy battleships. This Iowa-class vessel shelled Japanese fortifications during World War II and, later, North Korean targets. The Wisconsin's nine 16-inch/50-caliber Mark 7 guns, each one 66.6 feet long, could fire 2,700-pound projectiles up to 24 miles.



An easy walk from the waterfront leads to the MacArthur Memorial, housed in a former city hall building. It's free to browse the collections related to General of the Army Douglas MacArthur: wall-spanning strategic planning maps, medals, uniforms, news clips, even excerpts from speeches and memoirs questioning the value of war.

A statue of MacArthur in his WWII khaki uniform and cap flanks the entrance. "The statue was the most famous figure in town until the mermaids began sprouting up," said a Norfolk native, referring to the "Mermaids on Parade" sculptures created by local artists around the city.

Adjacent to a nearby shopping mall, an outdoor gallery called "Windows On History" recounts four centuries of area commerce, culture and conflicts that helped shape the nation. Rounding the mall, I encounter a church cemetery. Saint Paul's jumble of gravestones memorialize Revolutionary War soldiers who didn't live to see independence. The original church was erected in the 1600s; the current one bears a war souvenir from January 1776: the cannonball fired by British Lord Dunmore into its brick wall.

A short walk away, in Norfolk's trendy Ghent neighborhood, the recently renovated Chrysler Museum of Art, named among the nation's most innovative art galleries, offers a free indoor sanctuary. Current exhibitions include portraits of one of the nation's most revered wartime leaders, Abraham Lincoln; one series features Lincoln re-enactors in 19 poses.

When I leave, dusk's ribbons criss-cross the sky — an ideal time to stroll Ghent's leafy streets. Across from Harrison Opera House — once a WWII USO theater — a submarine crests on the wall of a showroom-type building. Its arched windows have been cleverly integrated into the vessel, and their panes reflect glimmers of fading sun. Schools of fish, sea turtles and other animals pop up in relief — as does a shimmering sculpted mermaid. The mural was painted by local artists Todd and Eric Lindbergh.

In a city that witnessed the Civil War battle of ironclads Merrimack and Monitor, a city whose waterfront displays the art of war and peace, this gleeful mermaid-guided submarine buoys the spirit. It's a serene place to rest eyes and feet.