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Danville's Veterans Memorial Building, constructed in 1925 to honor World War I veterans, stepped into the 21st century Saturday, cheered on by a few hundred sun-splashed onlookers.

A comprehensive \$8.1 million renovation transformed the aging edifice into a bright, airy facility with space for veterans, a senior center and an auditorium-sized room for community events. Construction took less than two years. Planning began in 2005.

The project was funded by \$5 million from the town of Danville, \$3 million from veterans groups and \$1 million from a grant."

It's been a long time coming," Danville Mayor Candace Andersen said. "This project honors veterans in a way they deserve. The first building honored that generation. Now we have this."

The master of ceremonies for the grand reopening was Danville resident and retired Coast Guard Rear Adm. Mary O'Donnell. Dignitaries on hand included Rep. George Miller, Rep. Jerry McNerney, state Sen. Mark DeSaulnier and Contra Costa Supervisor Mary Piepho. Andersen and town poet laureate Lea Kagel were among the speakers.

Also on hand were Arnie and Denise Corral, parents of Josh Corral, the 19-year-old Danville Marine who was killed in Afghanistan in November. A fallen hero memorial, to honor all war dead, will be dedicated in Josh Corral's memory outside the Veterans Building on June 23.

After Saturday's ceremony, many in the crowd filed into the nearly 13,000-square-foot facility. O'Donnell cited its multiuse functionality as her favorite feature.

"It serves a multitude of audiences," O'Donnell said. "It's an absolutely beautiful building. I think a lot of care was taken to every little detail."

One of those details was preserving the original Hartz Avenue entrance to the building. In a nod to the center's history, that entrance leads to a small foyer flanked by display cases featuring personal effects from two World War I veterans with local ties.

One includes artifacts from the late William C. Schneider, a cook in the Army's 305th field artillery unit, donated by his son, William A. Schneider, of Danville. "I offered the collection to museums," Schneider said, "but they all wanted to cherry pick. I wanted to keep the collection intact."

The collection includes dog tags, a razor, a Bible, a gas mask and a 1916 manual for Army cooks.

"My father never cooked before the war, and never cooked after," Schneider said. "I asked him why he wanted to be a cook, and he said, 'Three reasons. One, it's warm by the stove. Two, I had hot water to shave. And three, that's where the food is.' "

Opposite the Schneider collection are personal effects from Alamo's Lorenz A. Humburg, featuring a letter to American troops from England's King George V. Those items are courtesy of Elizabeth Humburg Dunlap.

Elsewhere in the center are display cases honoring veterans from all war eras, including the ongoing mission in Afghanistan. On Friday, Arnie Corral brought his son's uniform and backpack to the Veterans Center for display.

The tri-level center features hardwood floors, a large meeting room, a veterans resource center, a 2,000-volume library, a dedicated office for veterans services, a lounge and outdoor terraces.

O'Donnell said its downtown location is fitting.

"It's the center of the town," she said. "It's like the kitchen for your home. This is the same for Danville, so it's appropriate that it's here."

Said Andersen: "We wanted people to drive up and say, 'There's the old Vet Building. That's where I had my bar mitzvah,' or, 'That's where I had my quinceanera.' But now you come in and see we've embraced new technology and a new generation."