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The Bitter Homecoming

by Dennis J. Stauffer

I left Vietnam nearly 14 years ago and tried to put that phase of my life behind. I kept my experiences private, as did many Vietnam veterans, to avoid the pain of that war.

I also kept quiet because the war was not a welcome topic outside the walls of veterans clubs. The Viet vet became a scapegoat for our country's involvement in an unpopular war.

We faced rejection and verbal, sometimes physical assault. That's why many veterans quickly discarded their uniforms after returning home; it was easier than facing humiliation in public places.

Last month, Vietnam live again for me and for thousands of Viet vets with the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.

I learned about the memorial over a year ago and knew immediately I had to participate in its dedication, if for no other reason than to fill a void left by the Vietnam War. It touched my life and me generation deeply.

Of the four male children on our fatherless family (my father died while still a comparatively young man), three of us were of age during the Vietnam Era. Two of us had tours of duty in Vietnam. I returned home alive. My brother did not.



Also, both of my sister's husbands saw duty in Vietnam. Consequently, I felt a vested interest in that black granite wall being built in the city of monuments.

But there was a stronger reason compelling me to make this journey. It was to be a homecoming long denied veterans of the black period in our nation's history.

With that in mind, my brother-in-law, Bennie Vinton, and I left for Washington November 10 to be in time for the dedication on the 13th. Somehow, we hoped our participation would help put the Vietnam veteran into better perspective. The war may have been bad, but the soldier was not.

It was a bittersweet experience viewing the memorial for the first time. It stands against the cold earth in a depression in the ground just off Constitution Avenue, some 200 yards from the Lincoln Memorial.

As I stood there with a brisk wind sweeping past, I recog-

nized some of the names on the mirrored surface. There was my younger brother, of course, but there were other names, buddies I once knew as flesh and blood.

I was in Vietnam during the late 1960s as a senior radar operator for field artillery. Although our unit usually was in the middle of combat zones, we were spared the hand-to-hand fighting that took so many lives.

But I had friends who bought it over there, young men I knew as laughing, youthful buddies who died because they didn't shirk their duty, regardless of the morality of the war.

That was the bitter part.

The sweet part came because finally we were honoring those boys-turned-men, our Vietnam War dead, in our nation's capital.

The design for the monument has been as controversial as everything connected with the war. The 500-foot long black wall was selected from over 1,400 designs because its



flags and a wreath near the wall and snag patriotic songs.

Suddenly the voice of a distraught veteran roared from the crowd. His face was twisted in rage as he shouted unintelligible remarks about the betrayal of Viet vets.

simple, meditative design expressed both human tragedy and a sense of serenity.

The wall has over 58,000 names inscribed on it. Many of us were emotionally moved when we saw it. I heard a few veterans grumble; they did not feel its silent tribute and looked upon it as still another slap in the face.

The real reunion began on Veterans Day, November 11, as Viet vets after attending a special Armistice Day service in Arlington, filtered into the park to view the memorial.

Some Viet vets were teary-eyed, some angry, some merry. It didn't matter whether you were dressed in the remains of combat gear, leather jackets or three-piece suits, whether your hair was conservatively trimmed or shoulder-length and braided.

Comrades still, we shook hands and embraced, saying to one another with sincerity and emotion, "Welcome home brother." This set the tone for the coming weekend. The greetings and warmth touched every part of the city, wherever fellow veterans gathered.

There was a brief ceremony at the memorial this morning put on by children of dead or missing servicemen. They placed

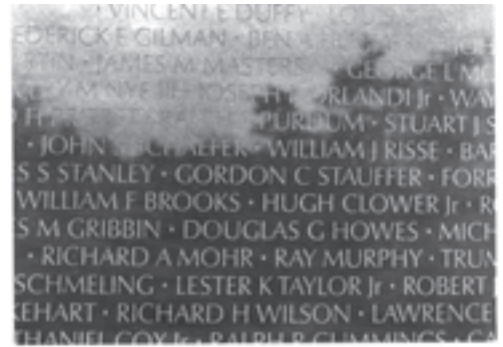
Other veterans, disagreeing with his views and the timing of the disturbance, began shouting him down. The disruption was



quickly brought under control when a group of long-haired, bearded veterans wearing identical windbreakers identifying them as members of a Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program began singing "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Soon hundreds were singing along. Several veterans near the distraught man consoled him. The order of the day quickly became apparent; the Vietnam veteran would take care of his own.

Three days of reunions were held at the Washington Sheraton. An attempt was made through computers and thousands of square feet of bulletin board to match veterans with their old overseas units. It was not unusual to see crowds of



veterans reading thousands of notes tacked to the boards and calling out old unit names and numbers, hoping to find a familiar face.

The morning of November 13 was cold and windy, but that didn't matter as my brother-in-law and I raced across town. As part of the dedication ceremony, Viet vets had planned a parade down Constitution Avenue. Veterans and numerous marching bands were to gather at a park about two miles from the war memorial.

We arrived at the park and saw placards with the names of states held aloft. We hurried to the one reading *Michigan*. There were about 200 veterans from the Wolverine state, a small number compared with contingencies from such states as Massachusetts with its delegation of 1,300.

The parade was an event with its ragtag arm of nearly 100,000 veterans, high school marching bands and bands from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines. Constitution Avenue was lined with thousands of cheering spectators. Some held signs reading "Welcome Home."

There were more Viet vets waiting at the memorial. As the paraders arrived, they fanned out to find vantage points for the



This scene caught my eye immediately, and still demands strong emotional response. It appears that these two were comrades in Vietnam and just became reacquainted at the Wall.

dedication. I found an open area near the monument set aside for Gold Star families.

Viet vets weren't the only people on hand. There were veterans from other wars, some who'd lost children in the Vietnamese conflict. One man stood out. Dressed in battle regalia from World War I, a 93-year old "dough Boy" inched his way through the throng hoping to get close enough to the memorial to present his tri-folded American flag from another era to the memory of those who had fallen three wars later.

When he was denied access by Park Service Officials, a chant rose from the crowd, "Let him over, let him over (a snow fence surrounding the memorial)." Finally, the officers relented and escorted the gentleman to the top of the memorial.

As we waited, I struck up a conversation with a veteran who'd lost a brother and two cousins in Vietnam. He was

severely wounded himself and, though he survived, experienced tremendous adjustment



Jan Scruggs, the Vietnam veteran responsible for the memorial greets another vet at Arlington. I had the unbelievable fortune of sharing a box with him on Veteran's Day.

problems after returning home. A divorce and bout with alcoholism later, he now was putting his life back together.

His visit to the memorial was a way of typing up loose strings in his life. It was as if the memorial brought the Vietnam war out of the closet into the public consciousness. The Viet vet wasn't to blame for the war and, for this veteran, the permanence of the memorial meant that he and his family would not

be forgotten.

The dedication ceremony was formal, all pomp and color many of us had experience during our military years. The Air force band played and the colors were presented with absolute precision.

The program was keyed by Jan Scruggs, the Vietnam veteran whose inspiration was responsible for the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In his talk he recited a fitting tribute from Philip Caputo's book, "A Rumor of War."

"So much was lost with you, so much talent and intelligence and decency. . . you embodied the best that was in us. You were a part of us, and a part of us died with you, the small part that was still young, that had not yet grown cynical, grown bitter and old with death. . . whatever the rights or wrongs of the war, nothing can diminish the rightness of what you tried to do . . . You were faithful. Your country is not . . .

"As I write this, 11 years after your death, the country for which you died wishes to forget the war in which you died. Its very name is a curse . . . But there are a few of us who do remember because of the small things that made us love you — your gestures, the words you spoke, and the way you looked. We loved you for what you were and what you stood for."

This article was published in the Grand Rapids Press December 5, 1982 along with several of the photographs the author shot while in Washington D.C. that week in November.