

## Memorial

While military service has been a tradition of most males in my family, for various reasons I did not have the opportunity to serve and am therefore not a veteran. To be honest, I cannot feel bad about missing the chance to visit South Vietnam in the mid sixties, the years in which I qualified for the draft, but I have always felt that a basic ingredient of my life was somehow missing. Still, one way or another, I am one of the lucky ones to have survived those times.

I well remember the day almost twenty years later when I visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. I had been on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that beautiful May afternoon in the 1980's, waiting to meet a friend. With Mr. Lincoln sitting behind me in his massive chair, and the Reflecting Pool sweeping out in front of me all the way to the Washington Monument, I noticed a crowd off to my left, over toward Constitution Avenue.

When she arrived, I mentioned the growing mass of people. We walked across the grass and discovered the reason. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was in its second year of witnessing to the destruction the war had caused my generation of young men and women. Boys and girls, really, who left our neighborhoods and traveled half way around the world to die.

The memorial's design speaks perfectly to the magnitude of the loss. An L-shaped path ran down a deep cut in the earth, made a right angle turn at its deepest, and climbed back up, a total distance of 500 feet.

A smooth wall of semi reflective stone ran along one side of the path, starting off less than a foot in and finally reaching over our heads to measure more than ten feet high when we reached the bottom.

Only a few names first appeared on the wall, but as it grew taller the relentless march of name after name after name kept rolling at us, as

if the wave of deaths was unstoppable. We could plainly see ourselves in the surface of the wall behind the engraved names. It reminded us we were still here, still alive, and obliged to honor those who had laid down their lives in service to our country.

Families, friends and loved ones had left notes and flowers on the wall, as well as little toys and photographs ... the debris of tragedy I would later call it, when in 1995 I saw the same kind of items pinned to the fence surrounding the bombed out Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Six years later I again witnessed such a display of remembrances at the former site of the Twin Towers in New York City.

As we climbed back out of Memorial, the wave of death dwindled little by little as the wall became shorter and the war ended. My companion's eyes were wet, and so were mine. So much death, decimating those who for the most part were America's children. So much promise snuffed out. So many broken hearts back home. Tear-filled days, lonely and awful nights. Wives, parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, friends and orphaned children. Sweethearts wondering how the boy they planned to spend their lives with could be gone, dead, just like that.

I pray it will never happen again, but I know it will.

Men sometimes find themselves embroiled in circumstances in which they must make decisions that prove deadly for their brothers and sons. I have always been aware of that aspect of leadership. I even understand why our national leaders must hire murderers to dress in General's uniforms to protect us. But it's hard not to hope the most guilty of the politicians who brought us the Vietnam War will some day rot in hell.

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