

A Proud, Poignant Wall for Vietnam Veterans

Fiercely proud, the Vietnam veterans stand under the sun and help others find the names of sons, brothers, friends, fathers who were young once and who will never grow old.

The wall is solid and enduring, unrelenting in its message of seemingly endless death.

The ones who are left, the ones who help the affected to find an important name chiseled in the midst of more than 58,000 other names, these men and women are somber and yet somehow exuberant.

They are seeing old friends, remembering old times that weren't all bad, and incredibly proud that America is beginning to recognize their heroism. Finally, the battered army jackets, the medals, the camouflage uniforms can be rescued from the backs of closets and resuscitated for a day of remembrance.

I remember the people and events that were so entangled with my early adult life as I ponder the wall and the people gathered here.

I remember the man who wanted me to marry him so he could avoid being sent to Vietnam. There was a time when they didn't take married men. In the end, I couldn't do it. Is his name here? I am afraid to look.

I remember the man who wanted me to share his military career that began, paradoxically, as a means of avoiding the war. If you joined one branch of the military for four years you increased your chances of being sent somewhere other than Vietnam.

In the end, I couldn't do that either.

I remember the man who wanted me to hide him for a short while so he could evade the military police, who were looking for him after he deserted because he just couldn't make himself go to Vietnam.

I corresponded with him in prison for the years of the war.

I remember the woman who wanted me to go with her to Vietnam to care for the wounded and the sick at heart.

Now she wonders why her child is ill and whether she passed on genes that were damaged in the war.

I identify so strongly with the men and women who were touched by the war – those who fought and died, those who fought and lived, and those who refused to fight and suffered no less for their decision.

The war was too pervasive to be avoided and it molded a generation.

They're middle-aged now, we're middle-aged, and to the young I imagine we look faintly ridiculous in what to them are hippie clothes and old-time hair-dos.

But for us the war and the time surrounding the war were intensely real – so real and so intense that they affect our lives even now.

For some only half-recognized reason we find ourselves at the wall. Our passion, our intensity and the solid reality of death are symbolized in the wall.

Fiercely proud they are, we are, the survivors.

Norton (Byington), D.B. (1986 June). A proud, poignant wall for Vietnam veterans. News and Observer 10:9.