

The Wall
by Andy Gueck

Everyone has heard of the Vietnam Memorial Wall, or better known among Vets as The Wall. A beautiful monolith stretching seemingly forever between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument on the Mall in Washington D.C. Thousands have traveled to visit The Wall, touch the names engraved reflecting the loss of so many men who went to war and did not return home. Countless others have left mementos to those fallen in honor of memory, promise or a chance to reflect on one's own mortality.

Fortunately, for all who served, there are several portable walls that travel around the country allowing those who cannot travel to D.C. to visit. One such Memorial was visiting a city in Colorado. At the time, I was in the Army National Guard, just on the end of an annual training cycle. As we returned to our camping and assembly area, we were informed that the Traveling Wall was in Colorado Springs and if we desired, transportation was available for us to visit. Several of us asked and were granted permission to travel to the site late in the day. We explained that for many, it was our first visit to the Wall, and it was very disconcerting. I had heard of the countless Vets who, when visiting the Wall, would move in the shadows, stand in the tree line, and only approach the monument in the late dusk or darkness.

My apprehension upon exiting the van in the parking area was high and only increased as we neared the tent that housed the Personal Locator. By now it was late afternoon, almost dusk in the area below Pike's Peak. I looked and could see the Wall, the inverted V that symbolized the monument designed to honor and represent my fellow warriors. I stopped and looked up the location of several names: some from my youth, high school friends, and other friends lost in combat. Then, as the darkness descended, I found my excuses to approach my past were fleeing.

I first moved to the far left of the display, not because I had names there, but everyone needs to start somewhere. As I moved to my right, slowly looking at the names and slowly counting panels, I reached a panel I was seeking. I looked and there in the middle, a name from my youth, not a close friend, but a school mate, an athlete, and yes, a friend. I knew he was killed during Tet, yet seeing his name on the wall gave it actuality. Then it was time to move further right to another panel and seek a second name. This one was a close friend, a classmate, a teammate through the many years of competition.

Suddenly, the ache and sorrow that had been there, hiding inside me since I had heard of his loss came pouring out. I was in uniform, a soldier, a warrior; yet, the sight of the name of a long

dead friend reduced me to tears. As I stood, head bowed, hand on his name, trying my best to talk to him, I realized then the true cost of what we had done. The true loss of innocence.

Eventually, I moved further to the right to two more panels, these side by side with the names of those I served with, and lost in a time only fellow warriors can understand. Again, I was embraced by the sorrow and loss of my friends, realizing that I and all survivors must offer our continued lives even in some small manner to their sacrifice and our loss. As I finally walked away, I discovered I was the last of our group to leave the wall as I joined them as they stood in a loose circle between the Wall and the parking area. I looked around and saw others like us, like me, moving from the darkness, from the trees to the openness in front of the wall. Each approaching his own reality, and as each of us had done, reconciled to our past, present, and somewhat future.

I again visited a traveling Wall a few years later in Omaha. The Wall was in Memorial Park near the University of Nebraska-Omaha campus, on a hill overlooking the expanse of lawn in a beautiful part of old Omaha. My wife, a dear friend, and I made the journey down Interstate 80, then I-680 to the Memorial. Again, I was reluctant to approach the Wall, even in daylight, not knowing how I might react. The organizers or someone had erected a small tent near the Wall to give privacy to many as needed. Most of us did. My friend wanted to walk to the Wall with me, but fortunately, my wife was very wise and with a hand on his arm quietly held him back and silenced him as he had never walked in what is always hallowed ground. I understand that questions were rampant within him, but he was wise enough to wait and ask them later.

I again walked the Wall and visited my friends, saying hello, wishing them well, and acknowledging their absence from my life. What did I say, I do not know, but at the time, the words felt perfect. We did not spend as much time at the Wall as I might have wished, but with two who did not understand, I and my friends on the Wall accepted that shortened reunion.

In the intervening years, I visited traveling walls twice, both times in Lincoln. Once at Wyuka Cemetery and the other at the State Fair near the Devaney. I was again a nighttime visitor, unwilling to show and share my feelings in the harsh reality of daylight, but rather stand, remember, and talk to those whose spirits are so gratefully encased in the Wall. The conversations are varied, rambling, and disjointed. How can you talk to someone you have not seen in 30 or 40 years? Converse with someone who will never change in appearance, age, or demeanor? Spend time with someone who will be forever 19? Yes, you can; it is incoherent, profanity strewn and to anyone outside listening, perhaps even demented. We talk about childhood friends who are now grandparents, of children never born, loves never consummated, moments of clarity that were only between us. No, outsiders could never hope

to enter that private, intense moment of insanity that consumes many Vets when they reach out to touch our past.

Finally, the day had come, the journey completed, and I got to visit the actual Wall in D.C. A collection of 40 some Vets with spouses on a 3-day bus trip from Nebraska to Washington D.C. to visit the Wall, other monuments and enjoy the opportunity to visit our nation's capitol. We arrived at our hotel late afternoon, got our rooms, unpacked and then reassembled in the bar for conversation and cocktails. We were located near Dulles International Airport so somewhat out in the country as it were.

As the evening wore on, we began to discuss the idea of going into the District and to visit the Wall then. We checked with a taxi driver who assured us he could procure the use of a 20-person van and drive us to the Mall area for what we felt was a reasonable sum. Thirty minutes later, we were on the bus heading into the city, apprehensive, reluctant, and scared. As the bus crossed the bridge taking us toward the Lincoln Memorial, those who had never seen it, enjoyed the haunting beauty of Lincoln illuminated in the darkness. Our driver dropped us off at the entry to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and let us know that he would return at midnight when the Mall closes. Nodding agreement, we debarked, silent, individuals but a group.

We slowly walked down the walkway to the Wall. There are others around, many tourists with cameras flashing, distracting, but not intrusive as we had each built a personal shield around ourselves as we prepared to face our past, our history, and our mortality. We all had different levels of discomfort as we approached the wall. Along the dimly lit walkway, we saw mementos of boots, pictures, packs of cigarettes, beer cans and whiskey bottles, letters, flowers—countless items that connected a name on the Wall to someone's memory, even 40 years later. For some of us, it has taken this long to address what we experienced.

In the solitary darkness, each of us addressed what we feared, admired, lost, and needed. As time passed, we tended to move to those who were the most broken, bringing the camaraderie of the journey, the memories and the moment. And, that is where the healing begins.