

A Wall of Honor

By Jane Runyon

The Vietnam War was controversial to say the least. Many people in America protested against the government's policy of sending troops to the southeastern Asian country in the first place. Young men refused to fight in the war. They even broke the law by burning their draft cards to show their discontent. Many soldiers returned from serving in the military to a less than warm welcome home. They found jobs hard to find. They found former friends who were now hostile to them. Americans didn't want to remember a war they considered to be a mistake.

Communist troops took control of Vietnam in April of 1975. As far as many Americans were concerned, that was the time to put Vietnam into the history books. But not everyone shared those feelings. What about the men who had given their lives in the name of their country. Shouldn't they be remembered? This question was raised by many veterans and the families of those who never made it home.

Traditionally, after the United States ended their participation in a conflict, the bodies of two unidentified servicemen were placed in a grave near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery. In 1978, Pentagon officials decided to break with tradition. Instead, they offered to display some of the medals awarded in Vietnam on a plaque behind the tomb. The plaque would be inscribed with the words, "Let all know that the United States of America pays tribute to the members of the Armed Forces who served honorably in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam Era." Veterans who were serving in Congress proposed the creation of a "Vietnam Veterans Week" to honor those who had fought in the war.

Other veterans and the families of those killed did not think that this was enough. After all, all of those who died were serving the United States. Why should they not be honored like all others who had given their lives in battle? These veterans decided it was time to do something. On April 27, 1979, a fund was started. It was called the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. A veteran named Jan Scruggs had been wounded in Vietnam. He was inspired to spearhead the movement to raise funds through private donations for a Vietnam Memorial. Through his efforts and the efforts of many others, \$8.4 million was raised.

On July 1, 1980, the plans started rolling. Congress gave the group three acres of land near the Lincoln Memorial where a Vietnam memorial could be built. In December of that year, people were allowed to register in a competition to design a new memorial. The total number of registrants was 2,573. By the deadline date of March 31, 1981, 1,421 people had submitted their plans. Now came the job of sorting through all of the ideas and selecting just one person to design the final memorial.

On May 6, 1981, the final decision was made. With all of the controversy surrounding the war, it seems only natural that there was controversy over the selection of a memorial. The winner of the \$50,000 prize for the design was a student of architecture named Maya Ying Lin. She broke with the usual kind of design found in Washington memorials. There were no heroic statues. There was no special flag staff. There were no patriotic writings carved into the walls. Miss Lin designed a wall. On this wall would be carved the names of each and every person who lost his life in battle to keep Vietnam free of Communism. That was controversy enough for some people. Add in the fact that the winner was Asian, and you had some people very unhappy with the selection. The fact that Miss Lin was Chinese and not Vietnamese made little difference to them.

The final design for the Vietnam Memorial was approved in March of 1982. There were some changes made to the design. A statue depicting three American soldiers of differing ethnic backgrounds was added to the memorial. In October, a proposal to add a flagpole was also approved. The memorial was begun in March of 1982 and dedicated in November of the same year. Thousands of Vietnam veterans marched to the site for the official ceremony.

The Memorial Wall consists of two walls which are over 246 feet long. These walls are a little over ten feet tall. The walls are made of highly polished granite which mirrors the person looking at the names on the memorial.



Name _____



Date _____

This was done to create a link between the lives which had passed to the lives of the present. Each wall is made up of 72 panels. Each panel contains 70 names. Each of the names is numbered as is each of the panels. This makes it much easier for people searching for a particular name to locate the one they are looking for. About 1,200 of the names are those of people presumed dead. They were declared missing or captured by the enemy. Their bodies were never found.

After seeing the Wall at its dedication, a veteran of Vietnam named John Devitt decided that not everyone would be able to travel to Washington, D.C., to see the memorial. Using his own money, he and his friends constructed a smaller version of the wall. This wall was called the Moving Wall because they could move it all over the country. They visited small towns and large cities all over the country. Thousands of people who would not have normally gotten to see the memorial could now feel a part of it. So many people came to the Moving Wall to touch the name of someone they knew, that the first wall was worn away. Three replicas have now been built to accommodate the tens of millions of people who have come to see it.

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Questions

- _____ 1. The United States won the Vietnam War.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 2. What did some people do to avoid fighting in Vietnam?
- A. They didn't answer their mail.
 - B. They burned their draft cards.
 - C. They went to school.
 - D. They moved to Turkey.
- _____ 3. Where is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier located?
- A. Richmond
 - B. Arlington
 - C. New York City
 - D. Saigon
4. Why do you think the Pentagon suggested a plaque for the Vietnam veterans instead of burying two bodies with the Unknown Soldier.
- _____
- _____
5. Why was the final memorial design criticized?
- _____
- _____

Name _____



Date _____

- _____ 6. How many names are engraved on each panel of the wall?
- A. 50
 - B. 70
 - C. 72
 - D. 83
- _____ 7. How have millions of people been able to see the Vietnam Memorial?
- A. A traveling replica
 - B. Closed circuit TV
 - C. Sponsored trips
 - D. Family member's pictures
- _____ 8. How was the money to build the memorial raised?
- A. Private donations
 - B. Taxes
 - C. Fund raisers
 - D. Government grant

Why would people build a memorial? Who would you build a memorial to?

Have you seen any of the memorials in Washington, D.C., either in person or in pictures? Which ones do you remember? Why?
