

IN THE SHADOW OF

BY KATRIN BRIDGET SNOW

It has been 20 years since the Vietnam War Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C. during Veterans Day weekend in November 1982, seven years after the war ended. A deceptively simple design that contains the names of nearly 60,000 Americans killed in Vietnam, it is only half the cost of the war. The Memorial will not be complete until the names of everybody on both sides as well as civilians killed are listed. A separate wall might be set alongside with the names of all Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers who died in the war, both walls enclosed by an immense memorial listing the names of the millions of Vietnamese (Cambodians and Laotians) who were not combatants but were by the far the largest number of those the war annihilated.

Thousands of Vietnam veterans crowded into Washington, D.C. from all over the USA for the dedication of the Vietnam Wall, hoping to be finally recognized after years of neglect and disparagement. After bearing the nation's guilt and sense of dishonor, they wanted America to acknowledge them for what they had endured in its name.

Katrin Bridget Snow was one of five Oregon coast residents who drove crosscountry to D.C. for the dedication of the Vietnam Wall.



GREGORY L. ABBOTT, 'DIMILITARIZED ZONES' (VVAW 1976)

The first names on the Vietnam War Memorial are from 1959. I was born in 1957. My earliest memory of the war must have been when I was about 8, probably when the Marines landed in Da Nang in 1965. I remember somehow knowing that a war had begun and that my mother was very upset. War was images of men with guns standing among trees, running, smoke, noises; people died in wars. I knew that. It was confusing how one day there was no war and one day there was. Are there many wars? I asked my mother. The last one (World War 2) was a long time ago, she said. How long did it last? Six years, she said. Six years was not imaginable, it was forever. I tried to imagine six years from then. In my mind a calendar year has always been a picture of a circle of months, each named, each with many days crammed into a complete cycle of the moon. I tried to imagine six years of the new war and got too many dead bodies to fit into my circles. I could get one picture of war but I could not make it last for six years.

That is my only memory of the Vietnam War until high school. It was evidently discussed at our dinner table but not when I was there, or else I have forgotten. In high school my memories, until the war ended, are meaningless — POW bracelets were more jewelry to me than a political statement. I remember when Richard Nixon ran for a second term as President in 1972 that I was not for him because he had promised to end the war and had not. I was indignant we were still in Vietnam. I am sure I picked up on all the prolific statements about the purposelessness of our involvement, but I don't think that it meant much to me personally until much later.

I do remember vividly the end of the war. My family heard it one evening on the radio or the television. We were glad it was over. There was no excitement or joy. I don't think Nixon's "Peace with honor" fooled anyone of us. Our family went to church to pray for the men and women who were coming home and to thank God for the end of the war. No one else was in the church, and it was vacant when we left. Mother told us about the end of World War 2 in Washington, D.C. where my father was stationed: throngs of people kissing each other and crying, crowding the streets, grabbing hands and holding one another. The streets and sidewalks of my town were empty, the

night silent. I was shocked at the barrenness. Mother told us to remember the indifference. She said it showed how people felt about the war.

Those two memories are the only powerful ones I have about Vietnam. When I studied the war, a college liberal, I learned most of the proper liberal, intellectual reactions — the war was wrong; it was full of dishonesty; it was a scar on the country's foreign policy; an example of our corruption — and I learned the social, compassionate reactions: the soldiers could not adjust. They were hated. They became junkies, committed suicide, were likely to freak out at any time. They were not accepted back into society. None of that meant any more to me than that they were statements I could make. None of it touched me personally. If sometimes it briefly did, if I got to talking to someone and discovered he was a Vietnam veteran, I avoided asking questions. I knew I could never imagine what they had been through and I did not want to try. I did not know what to say so I said nothing. Or I listened, tried to offer consolation — usually very benign, general and hopeful — and tried to change the subject. I reacted that way because the media kept portraying the veterans as people who fell apart at the seams whenever they thought about Vietnam, and I did not want to make anyone fall apart in front of me. I would have no idea what to do and the thought was frightening.

I finally began to listen and to personally understand when I spent a few months at Arch Cape with my grandmother, Bridget Snow. I met Steven and his wife Lori Jane, and Michael. I don't remember when I discovered Steven and Michael were Vietnam veterans, but I remember having the same reactions —

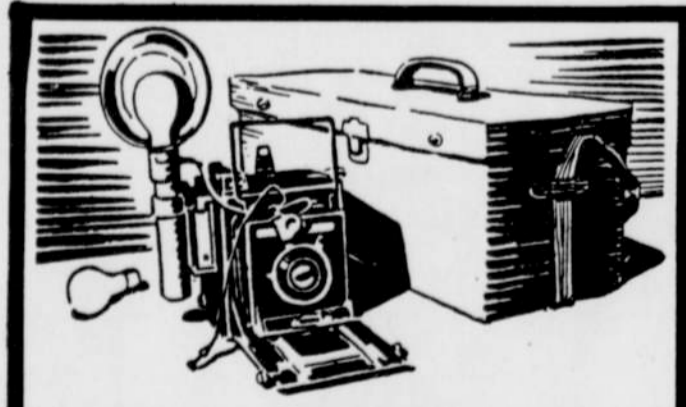
listen politely, even intently, look like I understand and not ask questions. I asked questions of Michael first because he seemed willing to talk about anything. When I realized he always talked vehemently and swore often and that I could not possibly get him any more agitated, I wasn't worried about which questions I asked or how I worded them.

Michael was a Marine in Vietnam, a ragged combat journalist in 1966-67. He and several others spearheaded the Vietnam Veterans Against the War when he returned. "We got spit on from all sides," he said. "The antiwar movement thought we were baby killers and hypocrites because we were vets, American Legionnaires thought we were turncoats, and the rest of America wanted us to shut up about the war. We took it in the gut everywhere we turned." Both Associated Press and NBC fired Michael for his insistent antiwar position. I liked his vehemence and frank informality.

Michael flayed the war with bold strokes: Steven peeled it in layers from his heart. Steven was Army Airborne with the 173rd Brigade, in the field in 1967-68. They called themselves "The Herd." He had not seen any of his buddies since they had airlifted him out with a 106 degree temperature. His memories over time had rippled into dreams. His capacity for feeling is boundless, and his emotions as finely tuned and immediate as if the world they rise from is just beneath the surface of his voice. Steven revealed his feelings about war sparely, but with a candor and vulnerability that startled me.

In September 1982 I received a phone call from Lori Jane, who is a warmhearted woman from North Dakota farm country who coaxes harmony and beauty from the world as readily as she does life from the soil. She said, come with us, it will only cost you \$150 for the entire trip — and in early November I packed, cleaned up from work in a last mad hurry, and was off to Washington, D.C. for the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial.

To cover three thousand miles in four days averages out to a relatively sane 750 miles a day, but we did not divide our hours of sleeping and driving in any way that could be considered sane. Shay called it our forced march across the



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URIAH HULSEY

MEMORY BOMB

I expect to remember other things.
But it is always the color that comes first.
The incredible greens, almost sinister
in their growing. The flowers, red or yellow,
silk-like, sick sweet and potent. And with
their shells of fine art, the insects
dancing insantly in the gross heat.

I should recall
faces edged with fear.
The foolish, brave talk of young men.
The lies told as bedtime stories.
The panic spreading like fog
whenever the incomings cut the dark
with red, hot light. And Death
always there, always waiting,
the lecher on the nude beach.

Those I can hardly see, barely conjecture.
Yet they are in me.
A sleeping seed waiting to grow.
A piece of metal itching to travel.
A book of pictures dying to be seen.
And someday they will move on me
like murders in the dark.
The bomb of memory will explode
into a red, hot thing.
And no screams of pain, pleas for mercy,
or barring of inner doors
will be able to keep out the fire.

—R. JOSEPH ELLIS

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