

THE WALL OF NAMES

country. She was the fifth of our group and like a conscience — a rare blend of bluntness and compassion. She was Michael's landlady in Portland during the antiwar movement. She waited in a bar and hustled bail and rent money for Michael with dauntless pleas to the bar's regulars. When the FBI came looking for Michael at home, Shay would not let them in the door without checking their guns. They always refused and waited for him outside. She spent much of her time in those years pouring endless cups of coffee for Vietnam veterans in her kitchen, absorbing the pain in their threaded tales, melting deep shards of crystal chill. The vets called her Godmother of the VVAW.

Why was I going? Why was I careening across the country in a canopied pickup truck in a rush to spend two and a half days in D.C. and try to cram learning everything about the Vietnam War while also visiting two close friends from college? I suppose I wanted to be at the dedication to try and understand about something with which I have had no connection. I really knew nothing about war, and after I got to know Steven and Michael I was aware of how ignorant I was. Not many others of my age do either. Those of us who were just young enough not to have any relatives or friends in Vietnam have grown up in a world without war (although we have certainly lived in the shadowy fear of it; we have spent our entire lives threatened with nuclear holocaust). I know people who have been back and forth to the Middle East, to Latin America, to Northern Ireland, who grew up with street gangs and rising city crime rates, who somehow experienced violence like a war — but it is not the same. There is a vast group of middle class children who have grown up without any idea of what war is, personally, socially, politically or economically. All through the weekend in D.C., I listened to stories, talked to my friends and other veterans, and searched my life for something comparable so that I would understand what they were saying. There was nothing. Nothing to understand the pain. Nothing to understand the warmth that surprised and overwhelmed everyone there. I could not know what they were thinking or feeling unless they told me. I could not know how they got from there to here in life unless they tried to explain. I felt like I was present at the Gettysburg Address, and that I was there because I knew a few of the soldiers President Abraham Lincoln commemorated.

A convenient myth says that people who have been through war do not talk about it. It is more true that others seldom want to listen to them, so they talk among themselves where they find mutual respect for the vulnerability revealed in the telling. By its condemnation at the end of the war the American public silenced the tongues that would have spoken. Ever since November 1982 when the Vietnam War Memorial thrust darkness into light, the veterans repossessed the history we had abandoned and have broken the silence with increasing acceptance. The country, once obstinately wordless, now seems to hunger for their words as war once hungered for their lives.

It was extremely important to me to be with Steven and Michael, the hours I spent listening to them. I strained to make connections between what they said and the world I knew. I went to D.C. to hear what Vietnam veterans had to say because I felt that whatever they learned, if we listen to them carefully we may never have to learn in the manner they did.

I asked Michael what he hoped for in Washington. "That we not be used as pawns in their military games," he answered. "They're welcoming us back, but at what price? So they can pat us on the back, enslave us to words like honor and duty and yank another crop of grunts for the sacrificial slaughter? I don't accept those terms."

The deeply felt, political nature of his answer stunned me. "But Michael, those are political things. Don't you want something personal, for yourself?"

He struck his words just like he hits his typewriter keys with two jabbing fingers. "For me, the political is personal."

We pulled into Washington, D.C. Thursday morning, November 11, about 10 o'clock, and nosed our way to Arlington National Cemetery for the Veterans Day ceremony. People were arriving from all over the country and from the 20th century's every war. The amphitheater was crammed. I stood in the curving walkway around the back, pressed up against a low wall. Scattered among the crowd were the soldiers who would take over the nation's capital, but in a gesture of reconciliation.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, bolstered by the U.S. Army Band playing "God of Our Fathers," recalled for us the cost of peace, the sacrifice of heroes, and the necessity of rebuilding a strong defense. His speech reached a climax:

"We learned one thing, we learned never again to send our men and women to a war we don't intend to win." *Hypocrite*, I thought. As if we hadn't intended to win the Vietnam War; as if a military ever fights a war intending upon a draw; as if in our nuclear age there is such a thing as a winnable war.



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Weinberger got a standing ovation that lasted several minutes. Where were the other vets who with Michael in the spring of 1971 had thrown their war medals at Congress and dumped a hundred pounds of chickenshit on the Pentagon steps? Why this seemingly blatant militarism from the generation the government had deceived?

"But that was the first acknowledgment from a high government official to our faces that the government had failed the fighting man and vice-versa," Steven said later. "It was an admission that it wasn't our fault the war was lost, which has weighed heavy on our minds. We were blamed for losing the war — but it wasn't us."

In spite of the speeches ringing with praise for the glory, honor and duty of military sacrifice, in spite of President Ronald Reagan's announcement that Vietnam was an honorable war, the government was not actually welcoming the veterans back. The veterans themselves raised the money, built the Memorial (designed by Maya Lin) and got themselves to Washington to

dedicate it. "The government simply crashed the party and tried to take over," Michael said.

Steven was not bothered by the speeches or the flags. He was reunited with his closest friend from Vietnam for the first time in 13 years, and all they cared about was standing next to each other in the cold air.

On Friday morning, the second day in D.C., Michael and I went to a panel discussion on Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used widely over Vietnam by U.S. forces between 1965 and 1972. Birth defects, skin diseases and psychological disorders are attributed to Agent Orange. The Vietnam Veterans in Congress and Vietnam Veterans of America sponsored the symposium. The new lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, now its junior Senator (and possible candidate for President in 2004), John Forbes Kerry, strode over and greeted Michael. In 1971, when the Vietnam Veterans Against the War marched to Washington, Michael and John Kerry spoke to Congress. Kerry, the former naval officer addressed the Senate (which Michael described as 'The House of Lords'); Michael the enlisted Marine addressed the House ('Commons'). On this particular occasion both were spectators.

As we listened judgment weighed heavily on the Veterans' Administration. Speakers representing the General Accounting Office and the two sponsoring organizations rose in turn to denounce the VA for its callous treatment of Vietnam veterans and the inept Agent Orange studies it had conducted. What knocked me flat were poignant accounts of veteran after veteran, men and women, who chronicled their own medical histories — of their children with birth defects and chronic medical problems, their wives' successive miscarried pregnancies — and who had been consistently ignored or patronized. One ex-Marine asked, "What do I tell my kids? What do I tell my wife? We don't trust you," he said pointing at a VA representative and received standing applause. "We want (an admission) that those guys over there (at the Pentagon) did this to us," he continued. "We're here together, we'll work through the system, but you've got to answer for it."

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OPENING THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

The names of the American dead occupy the black marble wall of the Vietnam War Memorial chronologically by the days of their deaths, arranged in daily sequence in alphabetical order. I was at the Wall when it was dedicated in 1982, looking for the names of a few friends I last saw wrapped in ponchos and tossed aboard outgoing helicopters. I purchased a large book the size of the phone directory of a small city. It contained the names of the 55,000 dead engraved on the Wall and where each was located.

I left Washington, D.C. with my friends from Oregon. We drove through Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho and Oregon, reaching home in Cannon Beach five days later.

We stopped every night at motels or the homes of friends or relatives, and each day we made several stops for food, gas and just to get out and stretch. On the back window of our small truck was a Vietnam Veterans of America sticker, the group that built and dedicated the Wall. Everywhere we stopped people noticed the sticker and almost everyone was related to or had known men who were killed in Vietnam.

Everywhere we stopped I opened the book of the American dead and found the names people wished to see. Many of them ran their fingers across the written names as had most of us the carved names of our friends on the Wall.

In this manner I crossed the continent. By the time I reached the Pacific Coast the American book of the dead was as well-thumbed as a phone book in a public booth. Until then I had not really understood the personal impact of Vietnam on America's heart. Each time I opened the book I felt I was performing a ritual of immense unrecognized grief.

—MICHAEL McCUSKER



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