

Panoramic Perception

War: the first topic that I can remember learning about in my early history classes with the teaching of the Revolutionary War. Today, war is in video games, movies, and the subject of thousands of documentaries—heck, I have even *played* war thousands of times with a deck of cards! Yet, despite its apparent prominence in the record of human existence, war to me seemed no less mystical than the tooth fairy herself!

Unfortunately, the Vietnam War was no exception. It was a tick mark on the timeline, a term, an event that I needed to memorize for a test. The Vietnam War was the war that was quickly glazed over in my history classes to date. It was fought in Vietnam, it lasted about 20 years, and the North Vietnamese Communist regime ultimately triumphed creating the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1975: thus was the bulk of my understanding... that is, before I visited the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.

Symbols speak louder than a thousand words ever could to me; the memorial was brimming with them. As I walked along the tour, symbols paired with the knowledge and experience of our tour guide, Mr. Monsees who was a helicopter pilot in the war, brought the war into a new light.

As our group approached the first statue of the visit, the War Dogs Memorial, I assumed that I was beginning an ordinary tour consisting of cursory descriptions for various monuments, but as our Veteran guide explained the statue's meaning, I quickly realized that I could not have been farther from the truth. My heart ached when our guide explained to us with weepy eyes that the war dogs were treated as equipment; thus, when a soldier with a dog was sent back home, his dog had to stay in Vietnam for fear of carrying back diseases to the United States. To my disappointment, only 250 dogs made it back to the United States.

Previously, this harsh reality never crossed my mind, but I was relieved to hear that the war dogs today are treated as service members and can even be adopted after their service. Within the first two minutes and thirty-seconds of the tour, I was already developing a new appreciation for the Vietnam War and the lives of those who served in country—including dogs.

Even the order of each military branch's flag flying in front of the memorial was symbolic. Their poles stood from left to right by decreasing number of casualties: the Army with the most, then the Marines, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Coast Guard whose members—to my surprise—patrolled both the United States and Vietnam coast. Despite each branch's differences in losses, all the flags flew high and proud, and as I stood before them, I could not help but feel the immense pride for our country and respect our military that they represent.

Unlike the soldiers in the jungles of Vietnam, we continued along the path as we approached the entrance of the memorial. Strategically placed, trees stood along the sides of the path ten meters apart from one another to represent how US soldiers "humping through the bushes" in Vietnam travelled: never on the easy path, for it would be lined with booby traps, and always ten meters apart to prevent an ambush or hand grenade from wiping out the entire group.

Then we stood for a moment at the wide opening of the memorial, symbolic of the entire world that the many young soldiers sacrificed as they entered the narrowing, dark tunnel of in country. But we spent mere seconds passing through the tunnel compared to the typical twelve months that a soldier in combat spent in Vietnam. With each step along the tour and each word of

wisdom our Veteran guide offered, the war and its challenges—often overlooked in the classroom—were coming alive.

Once inside the memorial, we climbed the steps through the double helix of wheelchair ramps, past the brushes on the second level, whose branches bear blood-red berries in the fall, and finally to the third level above the dense greenery, placed to symbolize the triple canopy jungle in Vietnam. Thus far, I had been smoothly soaking in the knowledge provide by our guide and the embedded symbolism, but as I ascended the last step and registered my surroundings, a new, more keen awareness hit me like a panel of polished black granite—actually 366 panels to be exact. Immediately filled with what I can only describe with words to be respect and gratitude, I realized the vital component missing from my history text books: the soldiers.

But at the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial the names of the New Jersey Americans who lost their lives in combat during the Vietnam War were etched in the walls around me rather than listed as a sum number. As we walked along the 360 degree path of the wall, our guide brought a few of the names to life with their stories like that of Eleanor Grace Alexander—one of only eight women killed in combat in Vietnam—who volunteered to serve as a nurse and was killed at 27 years old on November 30, 1967 in a plane crash, the six men from New Jersey who were killed in the Battle of Ia Drang Valley November 17, 1965, and even Bruce Springsteen's first drummer, Bart Haynes who volunteered for the Marines and was killed in Vietnam at just 19 years of age. He was only one year old than I am when he died.

I scorned myself for all of the times that I had listen to "Born in the USA" with my dad, a big Bruce Springsteen fan, and had not ventured to explore the magnitude of the lyrics. So I listened to the song on the way home from the memorial that day. Although the words had not changed since the last time that I heard them, they struck me with the power of organic passion and pain that they had not before. War did not care if Bart Haynes was Bruce Springsteen's best drummer; it took him along with millions of others who are not so lucky to have a song written in their memory. For the first time, war was beginning to feel anything but mystical. Its effects felt more panoramic and undeniably implacable than ever before, for the losses and impacts were all around me rather than printed on a text book page that is always flipped too soon.

Stopping at one of the polished black granite panels, I quickly noticed a girl whose pensive gaze focused on me. Her eyes seemed familiar but not exactly as I remembered them. Saddened, but grateful, wiser, and more aware. In the reflection of the dark surface, her appearance was less prominent than it would have been in a reflective mirror; yet, what lacked in detail made up for in depth, and I could see right into her heart and mind. I was the girl in the reflection, and I relished the enlightened appreciation that I could see running through my veins.

The panel that I stopped at was unscratched, one of only nine located in the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Judging by the panels to my left and right, I could tell that it was August 5: a good day for New Jersey. On all other days of the year, the panels are forever marked for the Americans from New Jersey who died in combat in the Vietnam War. For each person etched on the wall, only their name, birth date, and death date are recorded in the black granite. No rank. No race. All are equal, because they all are united by the ultimate sacrifice that they gave for their country: their lives.

Equality of the soldier in Vietnam is further symbolized by the monochromatic statue near the Northern Red Oak—New Jersey's State tree—in the center of the memorial, with an

African American Marine reaching his hand toward the Caucasian Army soldier with a chest wound who is probably not going to survive. Hovering over the perishing man is a Hispanic female nurse, even though no female nurses served in the field, to emphasize how all Americans were equal in Vietnam regardless of gender, race, or branch of service. As our tour guide beautifully stated, "In Vietnam, there was no color. Everybody in Vietnam was OD Green."

I had never paid much attention to the longterm effects of the Vietnam War before I went on the tour, so I was appalled to learn from our guide that the United States dropped more ordnance in Vietnam during the Vietnam War than we did in all the other wars combined—one-third of which never exploded and could take another hundred years to discover and safely remove. He told us that since the end of 1973, when the US signed the treaty and pulled its troops out of Vietnam, 60,000 people have been killed in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam due to unexploded ordnance. While I overlooked the Vietnam War for all of these years because it was not fought on American soil, millions of people have lived in a land still scared by craters in fear of an unexploded ordnance detonation curtailing their life or the lives of their loved ones.

While our country does not have visible battle scars like Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, another less apparent threat still looms in America: the deadly effects of Agent Orange. Americans created and used the chemical to kill the trees in Vietnam, thus removing the triple canopy that the enemy used to conceal themselves. Dioxin, along with several other chemicals found in Agent Orange are known carcinogens, and the last six names on the pavers of the "In Memory Program" at the memorial were all placed last Veterans' Day because of the harmful longterm effects of exposure to Agent Orange.

In 2009, my cousin Brett was diagnosed with Wilms' Tumor, a form of cancer that attacks the kidney, at just eight months old. Thankfully he is in remission, but my aunt—his mother—was recently diagnosed with thyroid cancer that she is tenaciously fighting, and her father, who was stationed in Vietnam during the war, is battling lymphoma. So when our guide told us about another Veteran guide whose son passed away at the age of 40 due to kidney complications and whose granddaughter was diagnosed with a similar kidney disorder, I was encapsulated because both cases were traced back to his exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. I realized that the devastating effects of the war are closer to my heart than I ever thought possible.

Looking to my left and my right, both of my brothers and parents were by my side; I realized how fortunate I am to not know the pain of replacing a blue star in my window with a gold one. Some Americans served in Vietnam for 12 months, some for 13, and others for less, but to all, I owe boundless veneration. And to the Veterans, like our guide, your insight is invaluable, for you are what bring the memorial to life and have helped me understand the people like yourselves who have made America the home of the brave.

Walking out through the widening tunnel, I knew that our tour was soon coming to an end, but unlike the soldiers bound to the walls, my story is only beginning. I have my whole world ahead of me because of those 1,573 names etched in the panels, along with hundreds of thousands more in our nation's history, who sacrificed their own worlds. Although it would not be enough to show my gratitude, I only wish that I could somehow shake the hand of every Veteran, look them in the eye, and say, "Thank you for your service."