

Visiting the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial was an experience that changed the way I understand the Vietnam War and the people who served in it. While learning about the war in school gave me a general amount of information, standing inside the memorial made the sacrifices of our soldiers feel personal and real. The symbolism built into the outdoor design tells a powerful story, one that encourages visitors to reflect on the lives lost, the people who served, and the families forever affected by the war.

One of the most striking features of the memorial is the circular wall made of 366 black granite panels, each representing a day of the year. The names of New Jersey service members who died or went missing during the Vietnam War are engraved on the panel for the day they were lost. Walking along the wall shows how the war unfolded day by day. Some panels have only a few names while others contain many which reminds visitors that the tragedy of war did not happen all at once but continued steadily over years. Seeing the names organized this way emphasizes that each loss occurred on a real day in someone's life. The design of the memorial also guides visitors through a symbolic journey. The entrances to the memorial are shaped like tunnels, representing the long and uncertain trip soldiers took when they were sent to Vietnam. As visitors walk through they gradually become surrounded by the panels of names. This symbolizes unity and equality among those who served and those who come to remember them.

At the center of the memorial stands a red oak tree, the state tree of New Jersey. Beneath its branches are three bronze statues: a dying soldier, a nurse, and another soldier reaching out to the one on the ground. Each figure represents a different part of the Vietnam War experience. The fallen soldier represents those who lost their lives, the nurse for the women who served, and the standing soldier for those who got to return home. Together, these figures remind visitors that war affects many different people, not just those who fight on the battlefield.

What made my visit even more meaningful was thinking about my grandfather, Joseph Christiano, who served during the Vietnam War. Like many veterans, he rarely talked about his experiences. Walking through the memorial made me think about what he and so many others must have gone through during that time. Seeing the names on the panels reminded me that every veteran likely remembers people they served with and the friends that may never have returned home. The memorial also made me reflect on how Vietnam veterans were treated when they came home. Many returned to a country divided over the war and did not receive the respect and recognition they deserved.

Standing in that space helped me realize that the Vietnam War is not just something to memorize for a test, but something to understand on a human level. The memorial does more than list names—it tells a story of courage, loss, and resilience. It encourages visitors to slow down, reflect, and recognize that each name represents a life that mattered deeply to family, friends, and communities.

My visit also changed how I think about honoring veterans today. It reminded me that respect should not depend on whether people agree with a war, but on recognizing the sacrifices made by those who served. The New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial creates a place where that respect can be felt, offering both remembrance and education. It bridges the gap between past and present, helping younger generations like mine better understand the realities of war.

In the end, visiting the memorial gave me a deeper sense of gratitude and responsibility. Gratitude for those who served and sacrificed, and responsibility to remember their stories and share them with others. Experiences like this show why preserving history is so important. They ensure that the lessons of the past are not forgotten and that the people who lived through those moments are honored in a meaningful way.