

NJVMM Scholarship Program Essay

Staring back at my reflection never felt more cruel. Etched into the commemorative black stone wall were the names of two people who died on my birthday, July 20th. They had only been a few years older than me, whose next birthdays would've come up soon. The Vietnam War stole far more than their lives, robbing them of their youth and the futures they would never get to see.

One board in the museum explained that the average age of soldiers in the war was just 19, only two years older than I am now. That realization made the distance between us feel almost nonexistent. These were teenagers fresh out of high school, unaware of the world around them. Their lives were not defined by war until it was suddenly all they had left. They had futures that once looked as open as mine does now. Seeing that number forced me to confront how easily my own life could have been shaped by circumstances beyond my control.

The deeper I walked into the memorial, I felt a quiet tension settle in, as if the remnants of fear and anxiety still lingered in the air, echoing the need to remain perfectly still and alert in life-or-death moments. Approaching the tunnel felt unworldly. Our tour guides, who were Vietnam War veterans themselves, explained that the tunnel was meant to symbolize the bridge between the two worlds. It mirrored the tunnels soldiers once used: tight, uncertain paths they had to enter, aware that what lay ahead was unpredictable and often deadly. As I stood at the entrance, I hesitated for a moment, realizing that for them, there could be no hesitation, as looking back was not an option.

Stepping through it, I began to understand the deeper meaning. On one side was the outside world, America, where the war was something seen through television screens and headlines. It felt distant, almost superficial, shaped by fear of the unknown rather than direct experience. Many people viewed the war as something separate from themselves, fearing that they would be drafted next. This disconnect was evident in the way returning soldiers were treated. Our guides shared that they were not welcomed back as heroes, but instead were

disregarded and even criticized, as if they were responsible for this conflict. Hearing this, I felt a sense of discomfort, realizing how cruel this reality was for these young heroes.

On the other side of the tunnel stood reality. For soldiers, war was not something distant or abstract; it was everyday chaos. Every day demanded alertness and order, emulated by the exact positioning of the trees situated 10 meters apart from one another. The environment itself was challenging with rough terrain, exhausting heat conditions, and the ever-present possibility of ambushes. There was no separation between life and war; it became everything. Before walking through the tunnel, I always understood “war” as a general idea. However, the tunnel, reflecting the distinct differences between perceptions of the war and lived experience, allowed me to understand the intensity of actually living through it.

At the core of the memorial was a tall statue composed of a Black soldier, a Latino woman, and a Caucasian injured soldier. The woman was helping the injured soldier, packing his wound, while the other soldier stood tall, trying to help them. Our tour guide explained that in the war, differences such as race, background, and identity didn’t define people. Instead, these differences were replaced by the shared need to survive. At first, the differences stood out, but the longer I looked, the more insignificant they seemed. Looking at the statue, I realized that survival was not individual but a collective effort.

The presence of the woman especially stood out to me. Learning that the majority of women served as nurses and volunteers, often risking their own lives to save others, shifted my perspective on what courage looks like. As someone actively involved in the Red Cross and hoping to pursue a career in medicine, I began to see this role as something I could live up to. I hope to show up for others in their most vulnerable moments as well.

In this space defined by loss and memory, I realized that each part of the memorial was connected by the same idea: distance. The distance between my age and others on the black stone walls felt uncomfortably close to mine, the distance between perception and reality, and the distance between those who experienced the war and those who observed it. The tunnel

collapsed that distance, revealing the reality of the war. Similarly, the statues showed how, in those conditions, humanity became shared instead of a divided concept.

What stayed with me the most was that these heroes emphasized the importance of humanizing the war. War was not simply strategy, numbers, or history alone. It is composed of people, including family, students, friends, and many more. Even after the war had ended, the effects are still seen today through PTSD, Agent Orange exposure after effects, and the lives of families who are still processing a loss decades later.

Reflecting on this now, I understand the importance of humanizing war. As new forms of warfare continue to develop, including more technologically advanced and introductions of space divisions, human connections are at further risk of being distant. In a modern society where information comes from screens and headlines, it is easy to forget the individual lives at stake behind larger events. This memorial reminded me that behind every conflict, there are real people whose lives are being shaped in irreversible ways. Leaving this memorial, I carry this reminder that remembering the human side of war is critical even if it seems far away. What may feel far away is closer to someone's reality.