

As I took my first step into the tunnel that led to the heart of the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, I was greeted by a gust of wind. The bright light ahead drew me forward, and I found myself leaving all irrelevant thoughts behind as I slowly made my way towards the entrance. The day was chilly, but the sun beaming down through a thin layer of clouds was enough to warm me as I entered. My eyes quickly took in the surroundings – and I was soon enveloped by the memorial in every sense of the word.

A large, black reflective ring of granite encircled me, with only the bright sky above. To inspect the structure further, I needed to climb a set of steps, but that would have to wait. I focused at first on the larger-than-life scene at the end of my path – a grouping of three bronze statues, perpetually depicting not only suffering and loss, but at the same time a strong sense of camaraderie and empathy. I strode up to the bronze soldiers, feeling each structure as an embodiment of the American troops who had been in Vietnam. I felt the expression of pain, acceptance, and longing were carved from the blueprints of the thousands of faces of those soldiers who had once fought to protect our American values.

Some places on the bronze statues were worn, shining with the lingering touch of hundreds of hands, leaving reverence to those who suffered and died in Vietnam. I reached out towards the soldiers. The brutal truth and overwhelming sadness of war once again struck me. The New Jerseyans named at the memorial sacrificed their lives, leaving their family and friends behind to mourn their loss. At the time, though, they were far from heroes in the eyes of many Americans. Those who survived the war were often ignored and even shunned once they returned to America. I found myself in that somber moment, reflecting on not only those who lost their lives in Vietnam, but also on those who were able to return home from the war – those soldiers who were confronted

with a new battle, a struggle to find normalcy, wanting desperately to carry on and yearning for the deep sense of appreciation and respect they deserved.

I retreated from the bronze faces and began climbing up to the second tier of the memorial. As I reached the top, my younger brother came dashing through the tunnel. I heard his small feet pattering on the cold cement and I glanced at his shining eyes. He ran straight for the bronze statues, stopping before them as I did. He paused, hesitated, and then gingerly reached out with his hand. He trailed his fingers along the forearm of the woman, carefully adjusted the brightly colored plastic flowers resting on the chest of the wounded man, and touched the tip of his finger to that of the standing soldier – warm, youthful flesh to chilled bronze. He abruptly turned, bounded up the set of stairs opposite me, and began to count the black columns that made up the circle. Running counter-clockwise, he acknowledged my presence by shouting the count at me as he passed.

I, too, began to make my way around the ring. I stopped at each column, understanding the layout, and reading the names etched into the black stone listed by the day on which the soldiers had died. It was soon after that I realized my reflection was clearly visible between each name, and as I was about to continue onto the next column, I noticed someone walk past me in the reflection. I turned to look and saw the retreating figure of an elderly man – and his jogging suit. I realized that he was using the circular shape of the memorial as a makeshift track. I watched him travel around the circle, never stopping, weakly but dutifully making his rounds, and all the while keeping his face expressionless, blank.

I took all of this in, contemplating what I had just seen, or more accurately, experienced, at the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Trying to make sense of the scenes that had unfolded, I glanced once more at the dark circle that enveloped me and saw two figures moving in opposite directions, one old, one young – the man in the

jogging suit and my brother – both devoted to their walks around the memorial. Together, they exemplified a poignant juxtaposition. The young, so innocent, with only some awareness of the depth of the situation, contrasted greatly with the heavy shoulders of the old man. Perhaps the man lost a child in the war, perhaps he lost a friend, and perhaps he was still trying to come to grips with his own nightmarish experience of war. My heart went out to him – why else would he be there?

What really caught my attention was the stark contrast of what I saw before me. With the innocent running clockwise and the man traveling in the opposite direction, the scene was truly uncanny. It seemed to me as if the young was running towards the future, embracing the unknown with innocence. The old was yearning to travel back through time, knowing the cruelty of life and wishing for the loved one snatched away by war. I witnessed that day a real-life metaphor.

My experience inside the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial truly was not a visit taken lightly. I entered not knowing what to expect and left with a deep sense of appreciation towards those who fought for America, those who fought in honor of our country. It is heartbreaking and scary to think that people only a few years older than I am were going off to war – many never returning home to live out their lives, their dreams, their desires. The Vietnam War profoundly affected so many young, innocent lives, forever tainted by the tragic experiences of combat. The families and friends left behind in grief will never forget what the war took away from them. And we, too, must never forget those who died in Vietnam. We must never forget the sacrifices of war.

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