

My dad was twenty-three years old when he returned from a year's service in the Republic of Vietnam. He brought a few things home with him: A Bronze Star Medal, the ability to assemble his M16 rifle in the dark, a taste for 33 beer, and a knowledge of how to fight proudly in an unpopular war. My dad was one of the millions of young soldiers who brought home such similar things. They kept them in a suitcase or an old box stashed away in the back of a closet. I don't know much about that part of my dad's life. As hard as I try, I will never be able to understand it. He doesn't talk much about it. He keeps it all locked away. My dad says every soldier has their own, personal "box of stuff" filled with memories they'd rather not have.

I never fully understood what prevented my dad from talking about his experiences. I knew that it was life-changing and sad, but why did that mean he couldn't talk about it? As I got older, I understood that it wasn't just "life-changing and sad," it was traumatic. While I understood and respected that, I still didn't wholly understand, even though I tried. I barely learned about the Vietnam War in school. It was a subject touched upon, but never explored. I never really knew what it was like emotionally. I only knew general information. That is, until I visited the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.

The memorial and museum were unlike any I had ever visited. Like many other teenagers, museums were not my first choice of a list of places to go. When my parents or teachers brought me to other kinds of museums, I spent the day walking around bored, not really looking at anything. But this museum was different. It was a topic that hit close to home. I read every panel and every piece of information, and I asked my parents if we could return.

To my father, the memorial provided an opportunity to be reunited spiritually with the brothers he lost in the war. Maybe some grew up down the street from him, maybe others he met in Vietnam, maybe he never knew them. It was his connection to

friends he made and lost, but also a way to respect those who died and thank them for their service. Our tour was led by another Vietnam Vet named Dan. He fought in the same unit as my father, although he was there a few years before my dad. When he found out my dad was a Vietnam veteran, he shook my dad's hand and said, "Welcome home." This was the most emotional part of the trip for me. Watching two Vietnam Veterans welcome each other home after all these years, especially with one being my father, was incredibly moving.

I still remember the first time I ever heard my dad say "welcome home" to a man he didn't know. We were pulling out of a parking lot just as a man wearing a Vietnam Veteran hat was walking into the building. When we passed him, my father rolled down the car window and said "welcome home, sir." My brother and I looked at each other puzzled because we had no idea who this man was, or how our dad knew he just came home from somewhere. When we asked, my dad told us he didn't know this man. He knew the man was a Vietnam Veteran by his hat. He explained that when soldiers came home from Vietnam, they never got a proper "welcome home" celebration or praise that soldiers from other wars received. Instead, citizens of this country spat on and screamed at them. To this day, Vietnam Veterans still tell each other "welcome home," as a sign of respect and brotherhood.

The trip to the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and Museum was not only an opportunity to gain more knowledge about the war, but also gave me a perspective that enabled me to sympathize with all Vietnam Veterans, especially my dad. I have a better understanding of why it is so hard for him to talk about the war. I have a better understanding of what my dad went through when he was only a few years old than I am now. I have always had respect for my dad, but after this visit, I not only respect my father, I'm proud of him. He fought for our country in an unpopular war, and though he didn't get the respect he deserved then, he gets that respect now, and I intend to make sure he always does.

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