

NJ Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Foundation
2014 Scholarship Winner

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After visiting the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, I was incredibly moved, in a way I have never been before, and probably never will be again. I was painfully sobered by my visit to the September 11th Memorial this past fall, but the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial felt different, because the 1563 names I read symbolized those that chose to put themselves in harm's way, rather than just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The idea of choice makes all the difference to me. After all, who in their right mind would choose to enter a situation on the other side of the world, with the enemy often dressed as an ordinary citizen, knowing there would be extreme danger and chance of death? Well, now I know exactly who would.

My grandfather was a veteran of the Korean Conflict, serving from 1951-1953. Fortunately, he came home physically fine, and married my grandma a few years later. My grandfather has been gone awhile, but his dog tags are still proudly displayed in my house. When I visited the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, I thought of the honor and respect my grandfather felt for our nation's veterans. I hope to carry this with me throughout my life.

It made me shudder to think about the ultimate sacrifice that roughly 1563 men and women made. Some of them have never even been found. I can image what that does to a parent because I know how my Mom gets when she can't reach me on a Saturday night. I touch the names and my heart skips a beat, and I don't even know them. The feelings their families experienced must have been heart wrenching. It's like they never are able to exhale for the rest of their lives.

As I walked around the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, the realness of war set in. This was not *Platoon*. This was not *The Things They Carried*. I learned that Vietnam Veterans who were lucky enough to come home did so to a rather unappreciative nation and empty promises of benefits and honor. They rarely got the recognition as war heroes because the US was too busy being angry and torn apart by conflicting opinions.

As an EMT, I take pride in recognizing that every one of my patients is somebody's child, sibling, parent or friend. I treat each patient the way I would want my loved ones to be treated. I have never been on a call where the patient died, but I already dread the thought of the patient's family being told. Then I look at 1563 names and imagine 1563 mothers, wives, and friends hearing the devastating news. My aunt was killed in a car accident in Holmdel in 2000, and I will never forget the ominous phone call, permanently breaking my mother's heart. It is sickening to think of 1563 families reacting as mine did. Each and every life snuffed out, no matter how young, had an impact in some way, and meant the world to his/her family. They should not be forgotten. They gave their lives to

insure our freedom, to preserve democracy, and to maintain peace and safety. Civilians preached about how much they appreciate their soldier's efforts, but the US as a nation didn't show it. The lack of respect for those lives lost in Vietnam is one of our nation's biggest missteps.

When I reflect at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, I am reminded of the fragile nature of life and everything I take for granted. It truly takes a special person to die for his/her country. When I buy a poppy for my car in front of Dunkin' Donuts, I think back to my visit to the Memorial on that breezy summer day. I think of my three brothers, and how any of the four of us could choose the same path to defend our country, and could end up coming home in a flag-draped coffin. The thought is mind-blowing, but in reality, this is exactly what happened to the 1563 names etched in granite that I silently read, my eyes welling up with tears at the thought of their sacrifice.

As a future physician, I have given serious thought to spending time as a medic to help our troops. I see it as "paying it forward" as a gesture of appreciation to our soldiers who suffer injuries while defending our freedom. I would consider it an honor to help our soldiers heal and return to their pre-war physical condition as much as possible. I will certainly be reading *Incoming* over Spring Break to get a better idea of what the medics of Vietnam had to endure.

Standing at the Memorial, I find myself in a vacant gaze, almost like a funk at the atrocity of the whole Vietnam experience of the 60s. It was such an angry time for the nation, such an unpopular war, yet so many stepped up to serve anyway. Images of the dense jungle, the blazing heat, the rice paddies, and the bloodshed enter my mind in what I am sure is only a fraction of the harrowing environment Vietnam actually was. Although the initial thought of all the 1563 deaths of New Jersey soldiers is sickening, after I compose myself and continue to reflect, my heart swells with pride and I feel tremendous respect for 1563 people I've never met.