

New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Scholarship

Most people my age today who are nearing their 18th birthday think about having a bright future, the limitless opportunities they'll have in adulthood, and making the most of their youth. They aspire to one day be entrepreneurs, businessmen, engineers, doctors, chefs, actors, lawyers, architects, and any other career you could imagine. They might want to be parents one day and tell their children all about what it was like growing up for them, and all the good times they had as young adults. They look forward to becoming an adult. They don't, however, fear that they'll be shipped off to die in a country thousands of miles away from their home or that they'll come back alive wounded, scarred, and looked down upon by their own neighbors.

I visited the memorial with my mother on a quiet afternoon. Both my parents are in their 60s and grew up during the Vietnam era. My father turned 18 while the war was still going on, but never got drafted because he was going to college right after graduating high school. He eventually did enlist in the Army after graduating college and after the war had ended, but had he enlisted or been drafted during the war, I don't know if I would even be here today. My mother told me a few times about the fear and agony many young men went through as they approached adulthood: "Once the boys turned 18, they were being drafted and sent off to war and a lot of times were never heard from again. During the news, they'd talk about what was going on in Vietnam and after the news they would roll the names of the soldiers killed. It was terrifying, they were dropping like flies yet they were so young." It always sends chills down my spine to think that kids my age 50 years ago weren't even sure if they'd live past 20.

The first part of the memorial we saw was the dedication to the five military branches. What really spoke to me here was looking down at the bricks dedicated to New Jersey veterans. Many of them were in memory of soldiers killed in action in Iraq and Afghanistan. While my parents will always remember seeing their friends be sent off to Vietnam and seeing the names of soldiers killed in action on the news reel, I will always remember the constant news reports of the War on Terror and the updates of American soldiers killed in the Middle East. Next to me was a dedication to a different group of people, the ones who inherit the suffering for years after a soldier has been killed in action: the families of those who serve. The statue of the mother with the folded flag on her lap with her son brought the image of grieving families trying to cope with the loss of their loved one. Some of the soldiers had wives and children back at home that they would never see again. Others were only teenagers, taken away from their parents forever by the horrors of war.

After seeing the dedication to the casualties of the South Vietnamese Army and the war dogs, we headed towards the actual memorial. A Vietnam veteran and his wife were leaving the museum just as we were passing in front of the museum. His wife was crying, but not him. He gazed up at the Huey, proudly smiling. We then entered the tunnels into the memorial. The first sight that caught my eye were the three larger-than-life statues depicting the soldiers who gave their lives, the women and nurses who served, and those who came back alive, yet changed forever from the agony of Vietnam. A yellow ribbon was tied around one of the fingers of the dying soldier statue, a symbol of pride and eternal thankfulness for making the ultimate sacrifice.

We then climbed up one of the staircases to look at the names of the men and women from New Jersey killed in action in Vietnam. There was such an eerie feeling seeing how large the memorial was, knowing that each name inscribed on the memorial represented a real human

being, not merely a casualty statistic. Each one had a family, a passion, a dream, and a reason to live. Seeing at least one name on each panel was equally as startling. While children were celebrating their birthdays, couples were getting married, students were graduating from high school and college, babies were being born, and regular day to day life was going on in America, there were dedicated and brave men and women dying for their country and for the other soldiers standing beside them thousands of miles away in Vietnam.

I only saw one name I recognized, on the November 19th panel: Charles J. Watters, a chaplain and Medal of Honor recipient known in my community. St. Michael's Parish in Cranford has a tombstone dedicated to him that I always noticed growing up. It's fascinating yet tragic to think that at one point, a soon-to-be recipient of the highest award in the U.S. military after giving his life in Vietnam once served my own community and celebrated Mass at the same church that I attend. We saw more of the yellow ribbons next to some of the names. I stared at some of the names for a while, shocked at how young some of them were. Eighteen and nineteen-year-old kids are supposed to be enjoying their youth and planning for their future, not being sent off to war.

Leaving the memorial, I felt a sense of solemnness deeper than what I've felt any other time learning about what happened in Vietnam. Any history lesson can tell you that 1,563 men and women from New Jersey lost their lives in the Vietnam War, but only at this memorial do you truly realize that these 1,563 men and women were not just numbers. They had faces and names, family and friends, and ambitions and aspirations just like anybody else. It's fortunate to know that today, these servicemen who never came home from Vietnam are not forgotten. They will always be remembered by their loved ones and their home community, and their spirits will be forever remembered at this memorial.