

On April 30, 1975, my father and his family escaped from Saigon on a small fishing boat and were picked up by a US battleship in the South China Sea. In 1990, my mother and her family left Vietnam and emigrated to America after her father was released from a re-education camp. In 1991, my parents met. On July 5, 1997, my parents got married. In the 25th of September of 1998, I was born in Somerset, NJ.

Deep in my veins runs the blood of my South Vietnamese family, the blood of survivors. My Ong Noi (my paternal grandfather) was a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese Army who fought alongside American soldiers. During the Fall of Saigon, he and his family fled the country on a small fishing boat and were later saved by the US Navy. My Ong Ngoai (my maternal grandfather) was a sheriff in the army along with his brother, who was a major. However, shortly after the Fall of Saigon, he and his brother were tricked into going to "re-education" classes. In reality, these classes were forced-labor prisons. There, he endured starvation, pain, and hard labor for five years (his brother endured for 10 years) in Hanoi. Once they were released, they and their families were given Green Cards to the US for their services in the South Vietnamese Army and with the US military.

Without the Vietnam War and the services that the Vietnam Veterans provided, we would not be living peaceful and successful lives in the United States of America. Although the war was a generally good thing for my family and for many other South Vietnamese escapees, this was not the case for others. As I stepped into the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, I was reminded of the hardships and sacrifices that Vietnam Veterans faced in order to give us happiness.

Upon my arrival to the memorial on March 26, 2016, I was greeted by a chilly breeze. This breeze served as a grave reminder of what the Vietnam War was: a chilling massacre characterized by massive blood-shed on both sides. Before this visit, the only bit of knowledge I had really known was from the perspective of my Vietnamese relatives. After walking through the museum, my eyes were opened to the American point of view. From the letters and journals sent home to all the names featured on the panels and pavements of the memorial, I became aware of all the soldiers who risked and sacrificed their lives for my people. Yet despite everything these soldiers had risked in Vietnam, those who survived were frowned upon, ignored, and even refused of jobs as they stepped back onto their own home soil. Although these soldiers are heroes in my eyes, they were viewed as insignificant in the eyes of many others during the tragic 1970s.

In the memorial, I personally met three veterans: Bill, who was a medic, Jim, who was part of the artillery in the Marines, and Matthew, who was part of the field artillery in the army. Matthew's story in particular spoke out to me. Matthew served in Vietnam from 1970 to 1971. He first started as a forward observer, then transferred to aerial reconnaissance after being injured by a land mine. Years after the war, Matthew walked into a Veterans Affairs office but was immediately rejected. He even went to the VA in DC for help in order to change the way Vietnam veterans were viewed. But each and every time he tried, he was ignored. It was as though the Vietnam War never happened. Matthew was later told by other veterans that in your resume, you can report how many years you served in the military. You can even say what responsibilities you had. But you can **never** say that you served in the Vietnam War. As this was an unfavorable war, no one would hire people who served in it.

This system is wrong. According to Webster dictionary, heroes are people who are admired for great or brave acts or fine qualities; the very definition of a Vietnam veteran in my eyes. But here, these veterans are treated as anything but heroes. These soldiers need to be recognized for all the heroics

they'd done for my people. That's why I appreciate the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. Not only does it serve to provide the American perspective to people like me, but it also recognizes all those soldiers as what they are: heroes. It recognizes all those who died during and after the war. It recognizes the nurses and their services. And it even recognizes the South Vietnamese who fought alongside their own.

In the front of the memorial lies a large granite tombstone and a pole that holds a South Vietnamese flag waving in the breeze. This was set up just in the past year by the South Vietnamese community here in New Jersey to honor all those who "heroically committed suicide rather than surrendering to the enemy" and those who were "massacred by the communists." When the Vietnamese government caught wind of this, they tried to take it down. But this memorial refused. And together with the South Vietnamese community, they raised the monument up, recognizing my people as a community and as survivors. I am so proud of that.

Unlike what ignorant citizens and the Vietnamese government had tried to do, this memorial does not try to cover up the Vietnam War. The memorial does not try to hide the gruesome facts. This memorial does not try to re-write history. As another veteran had said during our tour, history cannot be changed. By being the only state to construct this memorial and by ignoring the Vietnamese government to create the South Vietnamese monument, the NJ Vietnam Veterans' Memorial embraces the cold, hard truth. By giving the cold, hard truth, the NJ Vietnam Veterans' Memorial keeps history from being re-written. And by relaying all the gruesome facts of history to the public and by creating monuments for all those who were involved in the Vietnam War, the NJ Vietnam Veterans' Memorial gains more of my respect and appreciation.

This memorial means so much to me in that it remembers all those who served in the war as war heroes; it does not try to hide the truth from the public; and it recognizes the South Vietnamese community, my community. Unlike the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in DC, the memorial here in New Jersey recognizes the struggles that families such as my own went through to gain freedom. It recognizes our roles during the war and how the South Vietnamese population (such as my Ong Noi and Ong Ngoai) fought alongside American soldiers. And most of all, it recognizes us as survivors.

Because of all these reasons, the NJ Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, although chilling with all the cold facts, has all my respect, appreciation, and admiration.