

We're here. I've heard this story a million times—in my history textbook, in the retellings of my mom's escape, in small bits and pieces of my grandparents' first-hand accounts. I try to keep an open mind, but I feel that I know what I'm about to expect within the next hour. (Spoiler alert: I don't).

Our tour guide is Chuck, but Mike tags along. Chuck is a dear friend of my mother who had met him when she came to this memorial two years ago. They share a deeper connection because during the war, those were her people he was fighting alongside. At seven years old, my mother and her family were living inside a warzone. Her father was an officer stationed in Saigon who eventually became a prisoner of war. The rest of my mother's family managed to escape on a fishing boat. After being rescued, they were sent to America to start anew. I've always felt somewhat disconnected from my mother's story. I could never truly understand the sufferings that she went through. While she grew up in poverty and hardship, I was blessed with privilege and comfort. Chuck's story is something that she can relate to. To me, it's something I can only imagine.

It's a windy day and I'm only wearing a knit sweater. Mike notices me hugging my arms close to my body and kindly offers me a spare jacket from his car. This small sacrifice seems intuitive for him, and I think to myself that this is the nature that every soldier must have developed during the war. On the battlefield, one did not think twice about risking their own life to save another.

As we start our walk, Chuck reminds me that everything in this memorial was created with purpose. He points to ordinary black posts that line the path and states that they are all ten feet apart from each other. Chuck explains that on the battlefield, soldiers had to walk apart from each other to protect one another from booby traps. Today, we are advised to wear masks and to stay six feet apart in order to stop the spread of COVID-19, yet people see it as such an inconvenience. To us, the short distance of six feet in order to protect our health and that of others is an annoyance that the general public loosely follows, yet to the soldiers during the Vietnam War, ten feet meant the difference between life and death. It is a blessing that we are allowed to be lax in our discipline to the guidelines and not always suffer fatal consequences. In Vietnam, there was no room for disobedience.

We follow the path to a tunnel that symbolizes the journey soldiers took to Vietnam. On the other side, three statues stand in the middle of the courtyard: a nurse, a soldier on the ground,

and another soldier close behind. As an EMT, I recognize that the fallen soldier has a sucking chest wound, which virtually translated to a fatality during the war. Despite his seemingly sealed fate, the nurse is doing all she can to help. This is what the war was about—no man was left behind. All three individuals are of varied ethnicities, and Chuck points out a wedding band on the standing soldier's finger. War did not discriminate. No matter your race, relationship status, or education, anybody and everybody was affected.

Chuck leads us up a set of stairs to a platform, and I am enclosed in a sea of gleaming gray. 366 panels stand tall with the names of fallen soldiers, each etched in stone on the day they passed. I see my reflection staring back at me, and I feel this sense of togetherness, standing alongside the names of the soldiers. It's a reminder that they are not alone, that their efforts in the war were not in vain, and that they will always be honored. While these men and women were taken from this earth earlier than most, their legacies will survive longer than a thousand lifetimes.

Chuck told the story my grandpa could never fully articulate to me. Our language barrier has always kept me from truly understanding everything he had to go through and experience during the Vietnam War. These soldiers gave people like my mother another chance at life. My appreciation for those that fought in the Vietnam War runs through my veins. Without them, I would not be here today.