

One thing in my life that I will never take for granted is my freedom. I have the freedom to live the life I want and to capitalize on my opportunities. These simple luxuries were nonexistent for the soldiers who fought in Vietnam as they were exposed to the prospect of death daily on the battlefield and then ostracized and demonized upon their return home. The most jarring aspect of this to me is that not only were these people being put into such a hazardous and life threatening situation, but that many of the soldiers were my age, if not a little older than me. The New Jersey Veterans Memorial allowed me to begin to process the mindsets of those who fought in the Vietnam War and how it was created, with an intense attention to detail.

The design of the memorial is breathtaking and my mind was blown when I learned that just about every aspect of the design contained symbolism; from the teardrop shape of the grounds to the trees being spaced at the same distance that soldiers would be when on patrol. The initial walk through the narrowing tunnel was extremely humbling as my tour guide Mike told us about where his head was at when he arrived in Vietnam and the first wave of humidity crashed over him. I thought about all the things that I tend to worry about on a daily basis and then I thought about what the soldiers in Vietnam had to worry about; the unapologetic and unrelenting heat and moisture, the looming threat of the enemy or traps they set up, being given orders with little information or context and being far away from their families in a place halfway across the world. The first thing I noticed about the memorial was the sheer beauty that it beholds as I had never in my life seen something so uniquely and carefully designed. Everything has a place and everything has a meaning in the memorial and I think that the same can be said about the soldiers who fought in the war. Everyone had a purpose and everyone had a meaning, no one soldier was worth more than another.

Another facet of the memorial that resonated with me was the huge statue of the nurse and soldiers in the center of the memorial. One thing that Mike had said about the statue that stood out with me was when he talked about the mindset and bravado of the soldiers. Even though they were tasked with dangerous jobs and exposed to unimaginable horrors, many of the soldiers were just kids in their late teens. Mike made a point to stress the pains of survivors' guilt and how difficult it was to think about people that he was close to who were lost in the war. It takes an incredible amount of strength and fortitude to not only deal with the physical and mental damages of warfare, but also with the physical and mental damages of warfare at such a young age. To me, the statue represented how, no matter how big we feel, we should always remain humble, as you may never know what you are up against and how powerful the opposition may be. I was also extremely moved by the War Dog Statue memorializing the dogs that were either lost in battle or never made it back home. The dogs played an integral role in sniffing out bombs and other traps and saved countless soldiers' lives in the battlefield. I feel as though they deserved better, as they wouldn't think twice about saving the life of a soldier, but they weren't shown the decency of being brought home. I see this as a major sign of disrespect, not just to the dogs and their memory, but the soldiers took care of them and bonded with them on the battlefield.

My experience at the New Jersey Vietnam Veteran Memorial taught me so much about the Vietnam War and the lives of the soldiers that fought in it. It's a difficult topic to learn about because of the horrors and injustices that were commonplace for the soldiers, but I believe that it is imperative for their stories to live on and be told forever. The tour that I went on will definitely not be my only visit to the memorial, as there is so much more for me to learn and so many more stories to hear. Welcome Home!