

WASHINGTON, DC, VIETNAM MEMORIAL



Photo courtesy of the National Park Service

I've never been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. I've gotten near it several times on the Mall but have never had the strength to venture in. There are emotions I've locked securely inside me that I fear will erupt if I enter. I may eventually go, but alone, so no one I know will see me fall apart, Starship Trooper on his knees, sobbing into his hands. So many names, so many dead, and for what? I can only imagine the sorrow felt by those who fought down-and-dirty in the rice paddies who had their compatriots killed next to them, or who came back maimed or horribly traumatized. If I am so fragile at the prospect of visiting the Memorial, I applaud the strength of those, with much heavier burdens than I, who can stand it.

As a group, the reception we received upon our return compounds the angst we feel. I had seen myself as an avenging American warrior traveling across the Pacific to fight the Red menace, and we did the best we could. Yet, upon our return, my compatriots and I seemed to bear responsibility

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for the calamity the war had become in the eyes of other Americans. I never experienced the reported spectacles of being spat upon or vilified upon arrival at a Stateside airport—because I landed at Travis AFB, CA—but I bear the indirect scars nonetheless.

In 1991, fifteen years after the Vietnam War ended and immediately after the first Gulf War, C-5 aircrews and the troops from many states their aircraft carried received a marvelous welcome home upon landing at Westover AFB, MA. An entire hangar full of local townsfolk, perhaps five hundred strong, formed a hundred-yard long, horseshoe-shaped welcome line as the troops entered to booming cheers and applause. These were not their soldiers, but they received a welcome as if they were. Walking the reception line, they found eager hands reaching for them as if they were Super Bowl quarterbacks. All were very appreciative, but one memorable feature stands out.

It wasn't the younger troops who often broke down emotionally on the line; it was the crusty older troops and crew members, probably Vietnam veterans, who proved fragile. When they reached a group of fiftyish "military mothers," the women smiled, hugged them, and held on for a few moments. That is all it took. At frequent intervals, the older troops would dissolve emotionally at this display of gratitude, shoulders heaving, perhaps from a long suppressed hurt they thought no longer existed until the arms went around them. From somewhere deep within them, the knot of past emotional injury would erupt and not be stifled by any measure of self-control. Some tried to break free from the embrace to escape their rampaging emotions, but the mothers held them fast and, once the struggle ceased, would guide them behind partitions to allow the tears to flow and the wounds to heal. Finally, the jungle troopers had received their welcome home that released twenty years of repressed sorrow. Someone had finally said "thank-you."

I know these incidents happened because I, too, walked that line and felt the arms go around me.