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THE WALL: REMEMBRANCE & REFLECTION

By Dick Detra

It only took 24 years for three Vietnam veteran door gunners to make the journey from San Francisco, California, Olympia, Washington and Minneapolis, Minnesota to our nations capital. Emotions ran high reflecting on what this journey actually meant to Dave Huggins, Dennis Pierpoint and Dick Detra. The "WALL" draws you near when casually walking towards it from the Washington Monument, Lincoln Monument or Constitution Avenue. Today, it is the most visited monument in Washington D.C. Our purpose was to leave a personal momento at the "WALL", so that our unit in Vietnam and the men that gave the ultimate sacrifice would never be forgotten. That unit was the 188th Assault Helicopter Company "BLACK WIDOWS", which only existed from 11/66 to 12/68. The original company came over from Ft Campbell, Kentucky in early 1967 and set up operations at Dau Tieng, in the midst of the Don Dien Michelin rubber plantation in the III Corps Area of Operation. The 188th existed only in the environments of combat in South Vietnam. Their are 58,183 names on the black granite Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We could feel the inner power of the "WALL" as we walked into view. The knoll blends in perfectly with the surrounding landscape. The "WALL" was dedicated on November 13, 1982. It just so happened that we would be caught up in the Memorial Day activities dedicating the ten year anniversary of the "WALL". 1992 has been proclaimed The Year of the Vietnam Veteran. It was hard for the three of us to understand after so many years of feeling like outcasts of our own society. It was also ~~our~~ first experience with ROLLING THUNDER V, which brought together 35,000 Vietnam Veterans Motorcycle Club members to the "WALL". We were fortunate to get most of the event on video and the emotional levels can't be put on paper. It is something that one has to experience in person to feel the full impact of emotions. It took 20 years for Americans to realize that it was all right to hate the war, but not to hate the warriors!!! On November 11, 1992 President Bush has been invited to give the key note address and Mrs. Bush has agreed to serve as Honorary Chair of the "Remembrance and Reflection" Advisory Board.

About 2.5 million people from all walks of life visit the "WALL" annually. 2.9 million men and women served in Vietnam during the war years of 1959-1973. Activities will be held between November 7-11, 1992 for Veterans Day. It is expected to be the largest gathering of Vietnam Vets ever held in the U.S.A. We found the D.C. area to be very expensive and so I regret to say that I will not be able to make a second trip to the "WALL" for this historical gathering of brothers-in-arms. I feel sorrow in my heart that I can't financially make this journey East and for the rest of you who won't be there in person. It's a real shame that most of us live so far from the nations capital and OUR "WALL".

Oh well, back to our story.

I had contacted two old service buddies, Dennis Pierpoint and Dave Huggins months before Memorial Day 1992. They were excited about going and we made our arrangements for the trip. We spent six days in the D.C.-Alexandria Va. area and enjoyed the beauty of the historical East coast. The area consisted of lush green rolling hills, hot, humid and could turn cold in a moments notice. It even rained during our visit, which reminded all of us of the Monsoon rains while in Vietnam. We experienced elation and pride being with so many Vietnam Veterans, our first since returning HOME. There was a miniature copy of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, which is scheduled for dedication on Veteran's Day, 1993. In 1984 a flagpole and Frederick Hart's seven-foot bronze statue, The Three Servicemen, was added to the Memorial. The Memorial Day Ceremony was very moving as was the Joint Armed Services Color Guard and the U.S. Park Police Honor Guard. The musical interlude was performed by County Joe McDonald. Guest speakers included, Jan Scruggs (President, Vietnam Veterans Memorial), James Ridenour, (Director National Park Service), Rose Lee (Gold Star Wives), Dr. Doris Lippman (Vietnam Women's Memorial Project), Patty Crawford (Daughter of a Vietnam Casualty), Lewis B. Pullen, Jr., Author (Pulitzer Prize Winning "Fortunate Son--The Healing of a Vietnam Vet) and the Honorable George McGovern. We had planned on seeing a whole lot of sights but kept being drawn back to the "WALL" (6 times). The polished black granite actually reaches out to those looking into it for the names of fallen friends from the Vietnam War.

The "WALL" appears out of the landscape as a reflection. Dave Huggins flew with the 240th A.H.C.'s MAD DOGS out of Bear Cat from 6/67 to 6/68. Dennis Pierpoint and I flew with the 188th's BLACK WIDOWS and were gunners in the third flight platoon's SPIDERS (guns). We left two framed 8x10 photos as mementos at the "WALL". One was of the nose logo of the 240th MAD DOGS and the second was of the 188th flying in formation in front of the Black Virgin Mountain, NUI BA DEN. The inscription read: In Memorial to all those brave men in the 188th-C/101, who gave the ultimate sacrifice in aerial combat over Vietnam...BLACK WIDOWS. After our third visit to the WALL, I broke down and cried. I felt a huge burden being lifted from my shoulders, which I have been carrying since 1968. They say that the "WALL" heals and I'm here to tell all of the brothers that it did just that....it's a large step forward. We still have a lot of anger inside, held in for so many years, but the "WALL" started the healing process for three very special Vietnam Veterans.

When I arrived at Dau Tieng in June of 1967, the 188th A.H.C. was one of the first units to get the new UH-1H hueys with the new L-13 turbine engines. Because of the added power our unit saw a lot of action with different units and some very hazardous missions. We flew direct support for, Special Forces, MACV, Long Range Recon Patrols, C.I.D.G. (Montagnards), Korean (White Horse Division), Navy, Riverine Force, 1st Infantry Division, 25th Infantry Division, Cambodian Mercenaries, S.O.G. (Studies and Operations Group--Special Operations) and the 101st Airborne Division. We were at Dau Tieng from 3/67 to 4/68, with a 2 month T.D.Y. at Tuy Hoa, working with the Korean White Horse Division. We moved north to L.Z. Sally in April, 1968. During my tour of duty the BLACK WIDOWS were involved in, The Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase III, Kil Tong Hong (ROK 9th Division), TET 68, TET Counteroffensive Campaign, Operation Yellowstone and Operation Diamond Head. These are the ones I can remember. I'm hoping to make contact with others from my unit who can fill in the spaces. I remember places like, War Zone C, The Iron Triangle, Katum, Loc Ninh, The Parrot's Beak, The Fish Hook, Hobo Woods, Nui Ba Den, The Cambodian Border and last but not least, The ASHAU VALLEY.....WELCOME HOME!!!!!!!