

PERSONAL LEGACY

THE HEALING
OF A NATION



AN EXHIBITION OF OBJECTS
LEFT AT THE
VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

A joint exhibition of
the National Museum of
American History
Smithsonian Institution
and the
National Park Service

THE VIETNAM WAR

VISITORS BEGAN LEAVING TOKENS OF REMEMBRANCE AT THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL IN 1982, WHILE IT WAS STILL UNDER CONSTRUCTION. FLAGS AND FLOWERS HISTORICALLY HAVE DECORATED VETERANS' MONUMENTS, BUT THE PRESENCE OF MANY OTHER MEMENTOS IS UNIQUE TO THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL. THE FIRST, A PURPLE HEART, WAS THROWN BY A VIETNAM VETERAN INTO THE WET CEMENT OF THE MEMORIAL'S FOUNDATION.

SINCE THEN, VISITORS FROM THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD HAVE LEFT MORE THAN 25,000 KEEPSAKES AT THE MEMORIAL. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RANGERS COLLECT THE MEMENTOS EVERY DAY; EACH HAS ITS OWN STORY, OFTEN KNOWN ONLY TO THE DONOR. THIS COLLECTION OF MESSAGES AND GIFTS FROM THE HEART WAS CREATED BY RELATIVES, FORMER COMRADES-IN-ARMS, FRIENDS, NEIGHBORS, AND MEMBERS OF CIVIC AND FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS. IT EXPRESSES THE LOVE, GRIEF, AND PAIN THEY ASSOCIATE WITH THE 58,183 NAMES ON THE MEMORIAL'S 140 BLACK GRANITE PANELS.

THIS OUTPOURING OCCURS YEAR ROUND, PARTICULARLY AT CHRISTMAS, MEMORIAL DAY, JULY 4TH, AND VETERANS DAY. THE GIFTS ALSO COMMEMORATE BIRTHDAYS OF DEAD AND MISSING VETERANS AND OTHER DAYS OF PERSONAL IMPORTANCE. THE SELECTION OF REMEMBRANCES IN THIS EXHIBITION PROVIDES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO PONDER THE CONTINUING IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL ON THE GENERATION THAT LIVED THROUGH THAT CONFLICT.

VIETNAM. THE WORD ITSELF STILL STIRS POWERFUL EMOTIONS AMONG ADULT AMERICANS. THE WAR IN SOUTHEAST ASIA WAS THE LONGEST IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY—JULY 1957 TO MAY 1975—AND, EXCEPT FOR THE CIVIL WAR, THE MOST DIVISIVE. OF NEARLY 2.7 MILLION AMERICANS SERVING IN THE WAR ZONE, MORE THAN 58,000 MEN AND WOMEN WERE KILLED; 300,000 WERE WOUNDED; AND 75,000 WERE PERMANENTLY DISABLED. THERE ARE STILL 2,266 PERSONS LISTED AS MISSING IN ACTION.

FOR MANY AMERICANS, THE MENTION OF PLACES SUCH AS KHE SANH, IA DRANG, DA NANG, QUANG TRI, OR AN LOC EVOKE BATTLES FOUGHT AND FRIENDS LOST—BRIEF VICTORIES AND LONG-TERM AGONIES. FOR THOSE WHO SERVED THERE, THE SIGHTS, SOUNDS, SMELLS, AND HEAT OF VIETNAM ARE INDELIBLE. BUT VIETNAM WAS ANOTHER WORLD, AND EPISODES IN THAT FARAWAY PLACE WERE DIFFICULT TO EXPLAIN TO THOSE AT HOME. MANY VETERANS DID NOT DISCUSS THEIR EXPERIENCES IN VIETNAM BEFORE THE BUILDING OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL.

VIETNAM RETURNEES FOUND AMERICA TORN BY THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. FEW WHO SURVIVED THEIR TOUR IN "NAM" RECEIVED HOME-FRONT THANKS OR RESPECT. AND FEW WHO DIED WERE PUBLICLY MOURNED UNTIL THE CREATION OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL. FOR MILLIONS, THE MEMORIAL HAS BECOME A HEALING PLACE. LEAVING GIFTS FOR THE DEAD, THE MISSING, AND ALL WHO SERVED HAS BECOME PART OF THE RITUAL OF GRIEF AND RECOVERY.



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THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

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ONE GROUP OF VIETNAM VETERANS, LED BY JAN C. SCRUGGS, ROBERT DOUBEK, JOHN P. WHEELER III, AND SANDIE FAURIOL, WANTED ALL AMERICANS TO REMEMBER THE SERVICE AND SACRIFICE OF THEIR COMPATRIOTS. BECAUSE OF THEIR DEDICATION AND PERSEVERANCE, THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL, DESIGNED BY MAYA LIN, STANDS TODAY ON THE NATIONAL MALL. LISTING THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO SACRIFICED THEIR LIVES IN VIETNAM, IT IS A TRIBUTE TO ALL AMERICANS WHO SERVED.

THE WAR IN VIETNAM HAD A TREMENDOUS IMPACT ON THE LIVES OF SOME 60 MILLION AMERICANS WHO CAME OF AGE IN THE 1960s. IT CREATED TURMOIL AT HOME, SEPARATING THOSE WHO WORE A UNIFORM FROM THOSE WHO DID NOT. MANY WHO OPPOSED THE WAR SHUNNED THOSE WHO SERVED. EVEN VIETNAM VETERANS WERE DIVIDED ON THE ISSUE OF U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN THE WAR. THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL BECAME A FIRST STEP IN HEALING DEEP DIVISIONS THAT APPEARED DURING THE WAR. THIS EXHIBITION IS DEDICATED TO THAT HEALING PROCESS.





THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL COLLECTION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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THE KINDS AND THE NATURE OF THE OBJECTS LEFT AT THE MEMORIAL HAVE EVOLVED OVER THE PAST DECADE. IN THE EARLY YEARS, REMEMBRANCES GENERALLY WERE SMALLER, UNSIGNED, SPONTANEOUS OFFERINGS. TODAY THEY TEND TO BE PERSONALIZED ASSEMBLAGES. EARLY MESSAGES WERE HASTILY SCRIBBLED AND LEFT OUT IN THE OPEN, BUT MANY NOW ARE FRAMED, LAMINATED, OR COVERED IN PROTECTIVE PLASTIC.

AMONG THE FIRST DONORS WERE FAMILY MEMBERS, COMRADES, AND LOVED ONES OF THOSE WHO SERVED AND DIED IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. LATER OFFERINGS REFLECT ALL SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY—YOUNG AND OLD, AMERICAN AND FOREIGN. THE WALL SPEAKS TO MORE THAN THE VIETNAM GENERATION. IT REMINDS ALL PEOPLE OF THE ULTIMATE COST OF WAR.

THE ONLY CONSISTENT DATA AVAILABLE FOR OBJECTS ARE THE DATE THEY WERE LEFT AND THE LOCATION OR PANEL AT WHICH THEY WERE PLACED. AN OBJECT'S STORY IS USUALLY KNOWN ONLY TO THE DONOR. THESE ITEMS INVITE OUR CONTEMPLATION, REFLECTION, AND OUR OWN CONCLUSIONS.

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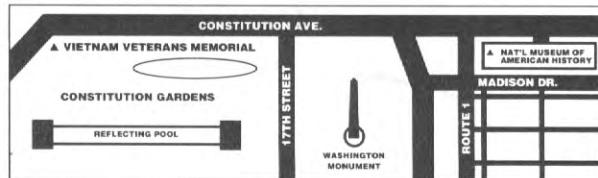
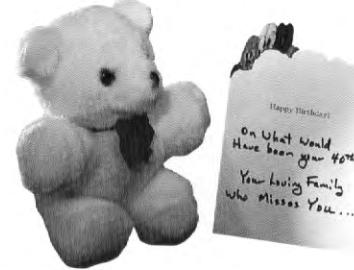
EDWARD C. EZELL
CURATOR



THE CUTOFF DATE FOR INCLUDING OBJECTS IN THIS EXHIBITION WAS OCTOBER 31, 1991, WHEN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE AND THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ANNOUNCED PLANS TO EXHIBIT SOME OF THE ESTIMATED OBJECTS IN THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL COLLECTION.

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CONTINUES TO COLLECT INFORMATION FROM DONORS ABOUT ITEMS LEFT AT THE WALL. PLEASE SEND ANY ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, INCLUDING THE DATE AND PLACE AN OBJECT WAS LEFT, TO:

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection
National Park Service
M*A*R*S
NPS/NCR
P.O. Box 435
Glendale, MD 20769



FOR FURTHER READING:

Capps, Walter. *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience*. Beacon Press, 1982.

Herring, George. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. Temple University Press, 1986.

Palmer, Laura. *Shrapnel in the Heart: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*. Random House, 1988.

Reflections on the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Photographs by the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Printing and Photographic Services. Introduction by Edward C. Ezell. Stackpole Books, 1987.

This exhibition is a joint presentation of the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, and the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. It was supported in part with funds collected by Beyond the Wall, Incorporated, Leah W. Miller, National Director; John P. Wheeler III, Fund Raising Chairman; Steve Wiltse, Treasurer; and Kristi Matthews Comer, Administrative Assistant.

Exhibition curated by Edward C. Ezell, Smithsonian Institution, and Duery Felton and Pamela Beth West, National Park Service

Written by Edward C. Ezell, Smithsonian, and Trudy Kelley, National Park Service

Project managed by Jennifer P. Locke

Designed by Jana Justan
Assisted by Amy Allen

Edited by Nancy G. Brooks

Produced by Exhibits Production
Division, National Museum of
American History

Brochure photographs: Eric Long, Tracey Eller, Jeffrey Ploskonka, Richard Strauss

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