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Disturbing truth and the Vietnam Memorial

By David McGrath, February 26, 2024



The Traveling Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, which has made previous stops in Hoffman Estates and other suburbs, will return this spring for a display at College of DuPage May 29 to June 3. *Daily Herald File Photo*

It felt as if someone were standing on my chest. I could not seem to get enough air into my lungs.

It couldn't be a heart attack. I was still relatively young and in good health.

I was on vacation in Punta Gorda, Florida, with my wife Marianne, and we were standing in front of the Traveling Vietnam Memorial.

This smaller, portable replica of the original memorial in Washington, D.C. was set up in a waterfront park the day we were visiting. It is the same model that will be on display at College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn **May 29 to June 3.**

Neither Marianne nor I had known any of the 58,000 soldiers killed in the Vietnam War whose names were etched into the 70 separate black granite wall panels. My brother Patrick served a year in the war and survived. For years he did not talk about it, and we did not press him.

Roughly half the size of the original, the assembled wall stretches the length of a football field and rises to a height of six feet in the middle.

I watch a dozen other couples and groups of people meander along its length. Close by, an older couple are both bending over to read a name near the bottom. Far to my right, a man in a red beret leans forward, resting his right hand against the wall.

No one speaks, and it is startlingly quiet for being outdoors, reminiscent of a funeral on a day of perfect weather, when the air seems almost cruelly bright and pure.

I feel like an intruder, and I am not sure what to do. Marianne moves forward and touches the wall with two fingers, tracing the indentation of letters chiseled in stone.

I get close enough to read one row: William G. Corey, Raphael Cruz, Neil B. McKinney, Howard Purcell, James F. Hiltz.

Five lives. Five men with personal back stories. Men my age in 1968. Nineteen- year-olds, barely past boyhood, with parents, brothers and sisters. Each kid probably had a nickname. And secret dreams like mine.

Fifty-eight thousand more with dreams like mine.

I close my eyes and try to picture faces, and I can barely swallow. What right do I have to stand here in tears?

It occurs to me I am crying for some of Patrick's buddies. For soldiers he played poker with. For their jokes about the army, the officers, K-rations. For how they could sleep anywhere, in a tent, in the jungle, sprawled across the back of a jeep, snoring away. For their equable youthfulness.

Crying for their conception of our country's righteousness and freedom that we all learned in school, and that they believed they were fighting for.

Crying for their bravery. Their patriotism. Their belief in the rest of us at home, and that they would make it back. For the unimaginable pain so many suffered. For their love of each other.

I'm crying for them. For Patrick.

And, I finally realize, for me, as I see how my reflection in the glossy black granite meshes with hundreds of their first and last names.

My heart breaks. I almost never cry, but how could you not? How could any American not?

Donald Trump could not.

It's all we need to know. We can forget everything else in the ocean of information about him over the past eight years, needing only to remember this incident: how in 2018, Trump was said to have referred to American war dead in a French cemetery he refused to visit as **“suckers” and “losers.”**

Of course, he denied it. Add it to his long list of other denials, including knowing Stormy Daniels and E. Jean Carroll and losing the 2020 election.

But his cold rebuke of American war dead has been verified by four credible witnesses, and most recently by his former chief of staff, John Kelly, who, while visiting his son's grave in 2017, was told by Trump: “I don't get it. What was in it for them?”

Trump's betrayal of veterans was not only credible, but inevitable, in consideration of his infamous hatred of losing. His denigration of John

McCain as a “(expletive) loser.” His disparagement of Gold Star families. His mocking, most recently, of Nikki Haley’s husband on a yearlong military assignment in Africa.

His sense of entitlement was manifest since Vietnam, when he was able to “win” a medical deferment for bone spurs, while those not as fortunate went in his place.

Of the countless reasons not to vote for Trump, this one overwhelms. In my mind, it disqualifies him as president. As commander in chief. As a patriot. As an American.

We turn to leave, and Marianne studies my face. There are tears in her own eyes, and we walk silently back to the car.

You can visit the memorial in Glen Ellyn in May. Or Chicago’s permanent memorial on East Wacker Drive. The experience is both moving and edifying.

When you approach the granite gravestones, take long slow breaths. Let your heart fill with tenderness and grief and love for the tens of thousands of young Americans who died for us.

Then try to imagine the kind of person who would call them suckers.

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