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Vietnam Veterans Memorial



In 1969, Jan C. Scruggs had just graduated from high school. United States troops had been fighting in Vietnam for about four years, and some of the worst fighting had occurred in 1968 with the Tet Offensive, the siege at Khe Sanh and the attack on Hue. Scruggs had no particular plans for his life after college, and his parents could not afford to send him to college; so he decided to join the army. He was 19 years old when he enlisted—the average age of the young men who fought in Vietnam.

Thirteen months later, Scruggs returned to the United States. He had been wounded and still had shrapnel in his body. He had vivid and sometimes terrifying images of the war in his head. He was treated badly by some U.S. civilians, who criticized, booed and sometime spat on veterans. Yet, Scruggs had an idea to build a memorial, not to the Vietnam War, but for the men who died or were missing in the war.

How could one man create unity in the minds of the people so that they wanted a memorial, raise enough money from private donations to fund the memorial and get support from the federal government to provide a place for the memorial? It was a daunting job, but Scruggs gained allies as he worked for his vision. Robert Doubek and John Wheeler, both Vietnam veterans, joined Scruggs.

They used their contacts to spread the idea of the memorial and began raising money for it. They set up the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund to accept donations and contacted members of Congress to get permission to put the memorial on public land in Washington, D.C. In 1980, a bill was passed unanimously by both houses of Congress and signed by President Carter that gave consent for the memorial to be built close to the Lincoln Memorial.

Meanwhile, the memorial fund committee was also holding a nation-wide contest for the design of the memorial. By March 31, 1981, designs had been submitted by 1421 people. Among those people was 21-year-old Maya Lin, a student at Yale University and the daughter of Chinese-American parents who had come to the U.S. in the 1940s when Communists took over their country. Lin's memorial consists of two walls of highly polished black marble that are about 247 feet long. Each wall starts about eight inches high above ground and gradually ascends from the Earth where the two highest panels are 10 feet tall. Engraved on the wall are 58,156 names of those who were killed or missing in the Vietnam War. (The number of names on the Wall has increased over the years because of new information found about the dead and missing.)

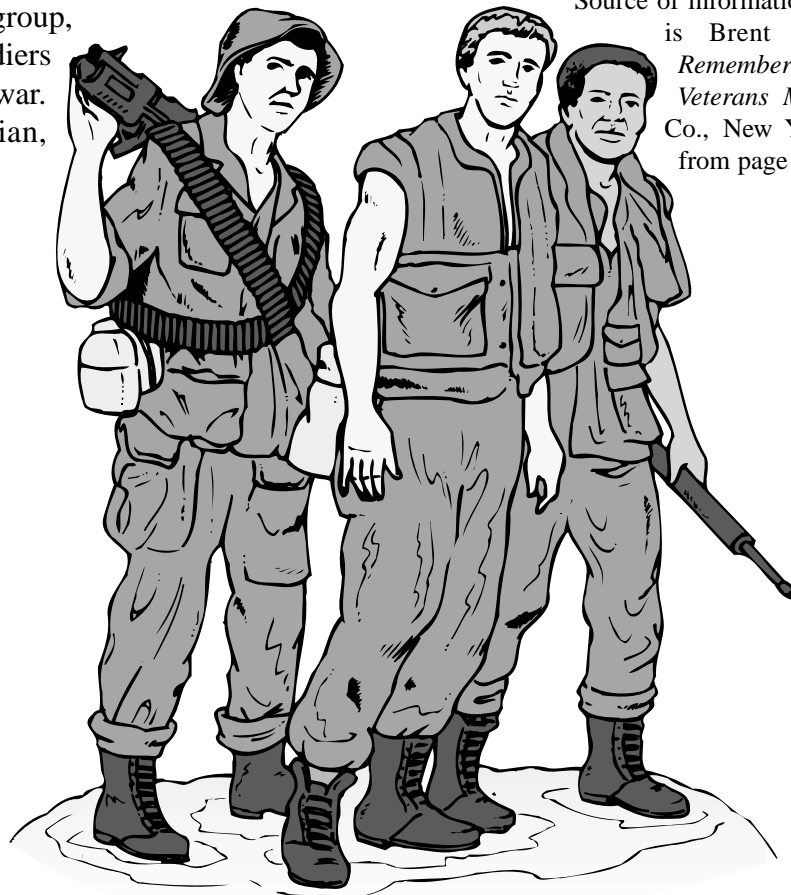
Vietnam Veterans Memorial

At first Lin's design was criticized as a "black gash of shame," a statement of "shame and dishonor" and "unheroic."¹ People did not understand the symbolism of the memorial. However, with the dedication of the Wall on Veterans Day, 1982, opinions began to change. More than 150,000 veterans went to the dedication. Since then, visits to the memorial have been emotionally moving and very meaningful for veterans and the families and friends of the men whose names are on the Wall. Many people leave gifts and mementos at the base of the memorial, and the National Park Service's Museum Archaeological Regional Storage Facility collects and saves every one.

Two years after the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial an additional statue was dedicated. *The Three Soldiers*, sculpted by Frederick Hart, shows three soldiers of the Vietnam era coming out of a stand of trees and looking across at the Wall. Each of the men is of a different ethnic group, as were the soldiers who fought the war. One is Caucasian,

one African American and one Hispanic. They are dressed in fatigues, carry weapons typical of that war and look tired and burdened from their experiences. The statue was commissioned when the government gave permission to build the Wall as a compromise for those who wanted a more traditional memorial to the veterans.

Nearby stands the Vietnam Women's Memorial. It is made of bronze and shows three figures: a nurse holding a wounded soldier and a second nurse searching the skies for a Medevac helicopter. Although the military did not keep specific records of women in the military at that time, an estimated 13,000 women served in the Vietnam conflict. Most of them were nurses, who suffered the same psychological symptoms after the war as the male veterans did due to the severe wounds and many deaths they saw daily. Finally in 1993, the women veterans of the war were honored by the dedication of their own memorial.



¹Source of information for text and for the quotes is Brent Ashabranner's *Always to Remember: The Story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, Dodd, Mead, and Co., New York, 1988. Quotations are from page 45.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Questions

1. What do you think were two experiences that made Jan Scruggs determined to have a memorial to commemorate those who had died in Vietnam? _____

2. Why do you think people at first reacted so negatively to Maya Lin's design for the Wall?

3. What are three facts about Maya Lin that would have made it unusual for her design to be chosen for the memorial (although all designs were judged without knowing who the contestants were)?

4. Why is it important that all three ethnic groups be shown among the Three Soldiers? _____

5. Now women have active roles in all branches of the military. What phrase in the paragraph about the nurses memorial shows that they were not considered an important part of the military during the Vietnam War era

era _____

