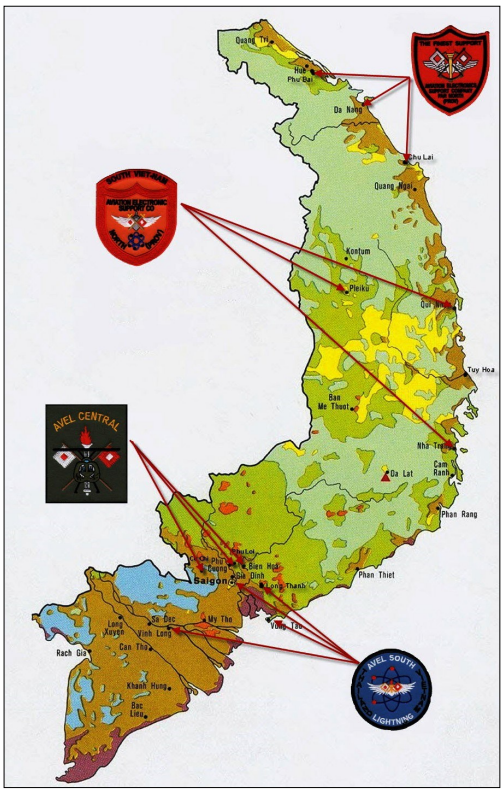
AVEL VIETNAM

Newsletter - March/April 2022

The Wall

By Pete Poirier



Origins

The Vietnam War Memorial was conceived in the mind of a Vietnam veteran after he watched the movie The Deer Hunter. He thought that there must be some way to begin to heal the wounds created by that war; not just the bullet wounds like his own but the wounds suffered by American society at large caused by anger and dissension. Whether Jan Scruggs knew it or not, He was about to embark on a huge project that would consume a major portion of his life.

First he had to convince the powers that be that this country needed a major symbol of the Vietnam war and that it needed to be located in the National Mall along with all the other monuments that attest to this nation's greatness. That alone was no small task. Many people considered Vietnam to be an unjust war. Many other people were of the opinion that America had lost that war and that memorializing those who died there would be disgraceful. However, Scruggs knew that the war had caused so much pain across the country that Americans needed access to a healing process. He knew that every untimely death is a sad event but that the death of a soldier is not only untimely, it is a gift to his or her country. Creating an opportunity to respect that gift would be the key to healing our wounds.

Development

Once all the necessary approvals were granted, Scruggs faced the challenge of raising sufficient funds to bring the project to fruition. He enlisted the help of a few able friends and formed a 501(c)3 organization that began soliciting money to pay for a memorial. Before long donations began to flow and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund began to grow. The fund reached over $8 million in a relatively short time despite the fact that no one not even Jan Scruggs himself knew what the memorial would look like. Ultimately, Congress decided that the most American way to choose a fitting memorial was to sponsor a design contest and have the winner determined by a panel of experts. Almost 1500 designs were submitted for consideration.

Design

The jury that determined the winner of the contest did not know the names or the background of the entrants. Each entry was to be decided strictly on its merits and whether it would esthetically enhance the two acre plot that the National Park Service had set aside near the Lincoln Memorial. The design the jurors chose was a black stone wall tapered at both ends, embedded in an earth berm with the names of the KIA and MIA etched into the wall's surface.

Continued on Page 2

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Continued from Page 1

The names were organized such that the name of the first soldier to die in Vietnam was placed at the apex of the structure with subsequent names added in date order to the end of the first wing. As the list of names continued they began at the end of the second wing and progressed back toward the apex. The result is that the first soldier to die met the last soldier in the center, at the apex. The black granite is highly reflective so that it displays the image of each person who visits the wall. The winning designer turned out to be a young, Asian, female undergraduate at Yale University named Maya Lin. She described her design as a wound in the earth that would heal with the passage of time.

Controversy

A large number of people did not like the winning design. There were objections to it's minimalistic appearance. There were objections to the black granite as suggestive of a dark moment in our history. There were objections to the winner being an undergraduate student rather than an accomplished professional. There were objections to Lin's ethnicity; that it was somehow inappropriate for an Asian to design a Vietnam war memorial. The objections were so strong that the Secretary of the Interior initially refused to grant a permit for the installation. Eventually, a compromise was reached whereby a heroic bronze sculpture of three soldiers dressed in variations of the casual style adopted by soldiers in the field. The three soldiers statue originally was going to be placed at the apex of the wallt which would have made the bronze figures the central focus of the monument and the wall a mere background.

After hearing Maya Lin's objections to that arrangement, a compromise was reached and the three soldiers were sited across from the wall facing it so that they were looking at the names of their dead brothers and sisters.

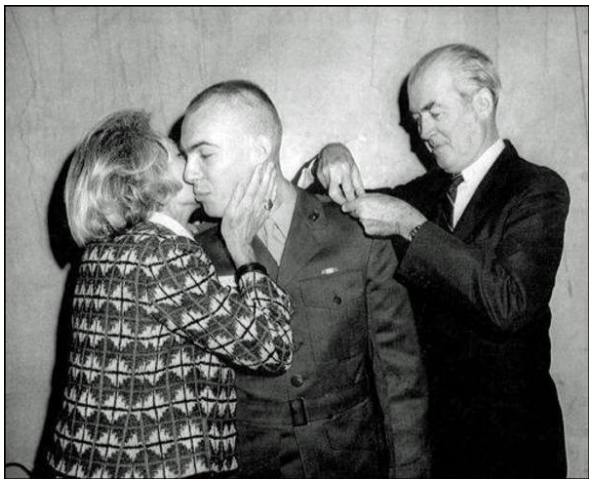
Reaction

Almost immediately people began visiting the wall and taking rubbings of names engraved on it. Also almost immediately visitors began leaving small treasures as mementos. They left notes, flowers, uniform hats, boots, pictures, service medals and awards, bits of family history, almost anything imaginable that would signal their connection to those whose names are inscribed there. Surely, many people visit the Wall out of curiosity. Many come simply to pay their respects. Some come and experience a profound emotional release as they cross the cobbled walkway that hampers their gait as they approach the Wall to touch it and remember that it represents a gift freely given during a most turbulent time and that like other such gifts it must be received with gratitude. Such gratitude is the healing grace that will bind our wounds.

Vietnam Vets You Probably Did Not Know About

Ronald Walsh McLean, USMC

Legendary actor Jimmy Stewart married Gloria Hatrick-McLean in 1949. Gloria had previously been a model. She had two sons from a previous marriage, Ronald and Michael. Jimmy adopted both boys. He and Gloria had twin daughters completing their family. Jimmy and Gloria remained married until her death due to lung cancer in 1994.



Ronald joined the Marine Corps after graduating from college in the mid-sixties. He was commissioned as an infantry 2nd Lieutenant and sent to Vietnam in 1969. He was assigned to A Company, 3rd Recon Bn.

While still a brand new squad leader he and his squad were inserted into the jungle on the DMZ.

Continued on Page 3

Continued from Page 2

Right away they were surrounded by a much larger force of North Vietnamese Regulars. Their request for extraction was denied so they had to fight it out.

For two days McLean's six man squad fought it out. While the firefight raged around them Lt. McLean broke cover to help one of his wounded men. He was shot in the chest and died beside the jungle trail.

McLean was the only one killed. It had been his first patrol. He was awarded a Silver Star.

Homer Hickam, U.S. Army

Does that name ring a bell? Maybe it does if you saw the movie "October Sky" or read his book "Rocket Boys."

"October Sky" starred Jake Gyllenhaal as Homer Hickam. It is the true story of Homer, a coal miner's son who was inspired by the first Sputnik launch to take up rocketry against his fathers wishes. At the end of the movie we find that Homer did pursue a career with NASA. What it doesn't say is that before Homer worked for NASA he was commissioned in the Army and spent a year in Vietnam.

Homer graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1964. He took a commission as combat engineer and in 1967 he was sent to Vietnam. He was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division and was present for the Tet Offensive in 1968.

Homer was awarded the Bronze Star and Army Commendation Medal for his Vietnam service. He was discharged in 1969 and began working for the Army Missile Command as a federal civilian on the Hellfire missile program. Later he began working for NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama. During this time he also began writing.

He retired from NASA in 1998. This was after he published "Rocket Boys."

A North Vietnamese Soldier Hid in the Jungle for 40 Years

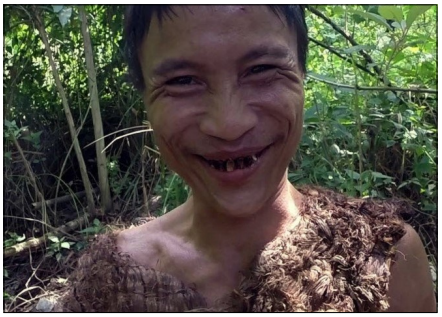
In 1972, Ho Van Thanh was a soldier stationed near his hometown in North Vietnam. After American bombs hit his home and killed his mother and two sons, he grabbed his one-year-old son and ran off into the jungle. He stayed put there, found by neither side of the war, until 2013.

Thanh was in his early 80s when he was convinced to come back from his self-imposed seclusion. His son was in his 40s.

Their home was a small, roughly seven square foot thatched roof hut at the base of a large tree on A Pon Mountain. Their only visitor was Ho Van Tri, a man Thanh didn't realize was also his son. For decades, Tri was their only visitor as he carried supplies of salt, kerosene, and knives to his relatives. He implored them to come home, but his father never believed it was safe enough to return. Even as the young baby became a boy and then a man, the two stayed put. Tri was the only visitor they trusted.

Other villagers tried to bring them supplies, but the two men only hid. The supplies they brought were hidden in the hut, never used. For food, the men foraged in the jungles but also planted crops they took from fields on the outlying edges of the jungles. The two men also captured small animals for meat, mostly mice, and stored the dried meat in the hut throughout the winter months.

The two men were finally coaxed to return to society in August 2013, some 40 years after Thanh ran into the jungles during the Vietnam War.



Ho Van Thanh

Ho Van Thanh's son

Continued on Page 4

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The government put them in a new home and gave them preferential treatment due to his status as a Vietnam War veteran. Despite the comfort of their new lives, the two never really felt at home the village. They often missed the hut by the tree that afforded them protection for so long.

Thanh would often go to the jungle for hours at a time, no matter what the weather was like. Doctors said he suffered from a mental illness. His son would also visit the forest for hours, even restarting his farm after feeling as though the two men had become a burden to their family. He didn't know what to do with his newfound free time anyway, so growing rice and cassava seemed like a good use of his time.

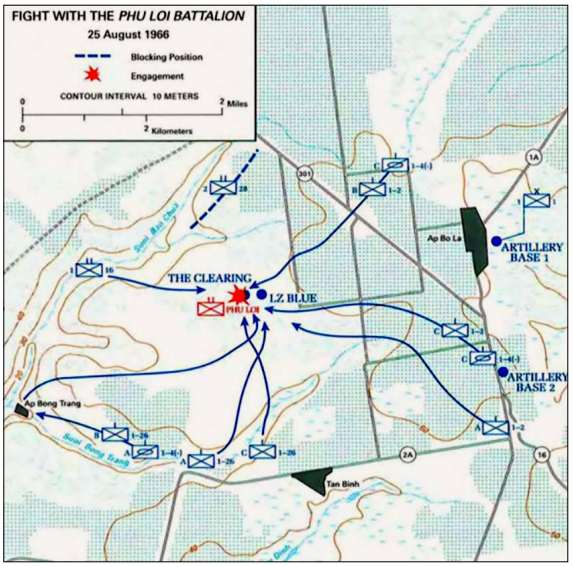
Eventually, the younger man moved out of the new house and back to a hut near his crops. He never got accustomed to the life of a modern Vietnamese man. He thought about starting a family but determined that no woman would want him in the state the forest left him. His father suffered a wide range of health problems aside from his mental illness. He lost an eye in the jungles and suffered from a few age-related diseases.

Thanh died of old age in 2017. The younger son lived in a newer hut, away from the conveniences of modern life. He still grew his own crops and survived off the land, but he didn't shun visitors or help any more.

He died in 2021 at the age of 52 of liver cancer. He never got over his father's death.

Battling the Phu Loi Battalion

On August 23, 1966, the U.S. Army 1st Infantry Division launched Operation AMARILLO, a search-and-destroy and road security operation in III Corps, covering parts of Bien Hoa and Binh Duong Provinces. The 1st Division had been in Vietnam for ten months and were part of the United States' campaign to stem the tide of Communist successes in South Vietnam with a rapid buildup of U.S. military forces. Operation AMARILLO took place in heavily forested jungle terrain. The area was thick with tall trees, tangled vines, heavy underbrush, and a network of Viet Cong trails and camps. To add to the 1st Division's challenges, August was the peak of the monsoon season.



The operation began uneventfully. But in the early morning hours of August 25, a 15-man patrol stumbled unexpectedly into a major Viet Cong base area - a base, it would turn out, belonging to the Viet Cong elite "Phu Loi" Battalion.

The infantrymen radioed for reinforcements after coming under heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire. But as a relief column made its way toward the trapped men, Viet Cong troops ambushed the column in a small clearing. A second, larger close quarters firefight began.

U.S. commanders quickly organized another relief operation, and several more infantry and cavalry units converged on the site of the fight. The clearing where the ambush occurred was so small that there was room for only a single helicopter, and the dense jungle and general confusion made it difficult for the surrounded men to coordinate a cohesive defense. One medevac chopper was shot down early on, obstructing the small landing area and making the evacuation of casualties nearly impossible. U.S. reinforcements eventually secured another landing zone several hundred yards away, LZ Blue, from which to evacuate the wounded.

The battle continued for most of the day. The Phu Loi Battalion's base was a well-fortified network of bunkers, tunnels, and trenches, while the Americans were forced to make do with whatever cover they could find. Communist troops also had heavy weapons-including large caliber machine guns, recoilless rifles, and grenade launchers-and an intimate knowledge of the terrain, giving them yet another advantage.

U.S. troops took heavy casualties but finally managed to establish a coherent perimeter before nightfall. Early the next morning, U.S. commanders called in air strikes.

Continued on Page 5

Continued from Page 4

Two napalm canisters came in off target, killing two Americans and wounding over a dozen others. In the early morning of the next day, reconnaissance patrols found that the Viet Cong had withdrawn in the night. The rest of Operation AMARILLO was uneventful as the Viet Cong troops in the area declined to reengage. The operation ended on September 1, 1966. A total of 41 Americans were killed during AMARILLO, 34 of them on August 25. Almost 250 were wounded. Of the 15 men in the original patrol that stumbled into the base, six were killed in action. Viet Cong casualties were much higher. Between 102 and 171 Viet Cong soldiers were killed and many more were wounded, reducing the crack Phu Loi Battalion to about half strength.

The battle on August 25, 1966, illustrated the challenges that U.S. troops faced for most of the war: ground that was well known to enemy forces but not to allied troops; a hot, humid, and rainy climate that exhausted men and equipment; terrain that impeded maneuverability and visibility; and enemy troops who were tough to find and to pursue. Despite these challenges, American troops nearly always prevailed in combat, never losing a major battle during the war.

NEW AVEL, AVIONICS AND VIETNAM VETERANS REGISTERED

None Submitted

TAPS

Albert Gallagher
Warrant Officer, Avel Central, Cu Chi: Dec. 1968-Dec. 1969
He died on 20 October 2021. He was 91 years old.

Criss Brown
263rd Maintenance Co. (LEM), Red Beach: 1969-1970
He died on 30 November 2021. He was 75 years old

PHOTOS

None Submitted

CHANGE OF ADDRESS/EMAIL/PHONE

Warren Beneville has a new email address: wdbeneville@gmail.com
Frank Repinski moved to 1004 Coast Grade Street, Wake forest NC 27587. Cell number 786 205-5277

Send your change of address and email to jmccabe51@gmail.com

The Special Pension for Veterans' Aid and Attendance

A little-known veterans' benefit for long-term care expenses is available to wartime veterans and their spouses. But the benefit is being overlooked by thousands of families, industry observers say. It pays up to $1,644 a month, $19,736 annually, toward assisted living, nursing homes or in-home care for veterans 65 and older who served at least 90 days and one day during wartime — stateside or overseas. Veterans and their spouses can receive up to $23,396 annually and spouses of deceased veterans, $12,681.

Yet, an estimated $22 billion a year goes unclaimed. In 2007, only 134,000 seniors nationwide received the benefit, which was established in 1952.

Approval comes in four to six months. The process is streamlined for vets who are blind or have memory issues and widows with medical needs. Most applicants qualify and payments are retroactive. The few who are denied on excessive liquid assets can seek financial advice to qualify. Without it, many vets are forced to go on Medicaid. The form number that the doctor has to fill out and sign is VA Form 21-2680.

The First "Welcome Home" Parade

On July 10, 1969, the first American troops to be withdrawn from the Vietnam War were welcomed home with a parade and barbecue in Seattle. Led by two Army bands, a battalion of 778 soldiers -- wearing jungle fatigues and carrying M-16 rifles with fixed bayonets -- marched down 4th Avenue from Virginia to Madison. Spectators lined the street, waving flags and cheering as the soldiers passed by. Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor, Senator Warren G. Magnuson, Seattle Mayor Floyd Miller, Lieutenant Governor John A. Cherberg, and other dignitaries greeted the troops with speeches from a reviewing platform set up in front of the downtown library. Anti-war demonstrators interrupted some of the speeches with shouts of "Bring them all back." At the end of the ceremonies, the soldiers were trucked to the Seattle Center for a salmon barbecue and then returned to Fort Lewis to complete processing for either discharge from the military or reassignment.

The soldiers were the first to leave Vietnam under a "Vietnamization" policy adopted by President Richard M. Nixon in response to growing opposition to U.S. involvement in the war. About 540,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam at the time; more than 30,000 had died there so far. Nixon hoped to defuse anti-war sentiment by gradually withdrawing American troops from combat positions and replacing them with soldiers from the South Vietnamese army. Shifting the burden of fighting the Communists of North Vietnam to the South Vietnamese and away from the U.S., he said, would lead to "peace with honor" and an end to the decades-long war.

On June 8, 1969, Nixon announced that 25,000 Americans would be sent home during the first stage of the "Vietnamization" process. The Third Battalion, 60th Infantry, Ninth Infantry Division, was the first to leave. Most of the men assigned to the unit had completed or nearly completed their one-year tours of duty and had been scheduled to return home anyway. Under the new policy, they would not be replaced.

South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, and Defense Minister Nguyen Van Vy also spoke. "Together we have repelled Communist aggression," Thieu told the soldiers. "This has been our purpose and our goal." He noted that 1,855 members of the Ninth Infantry Division had been killed in action in Vietnam so far. "Our duty is to make sure this sacrifice was not in vain."

The soldiers were given leis and small gifts by young Vietnamese women, and then ushered into nine C-141 transport planes and flown to McChord Air Force Base. The Army Personnel Center at Fort Lewis had been selected as the processing site for the returning troops.

The infantrymen arrived at McChord on the afternoon of July 8, 1969. They spent the next day practicing close-order drills at Fort Lewis, in preparation for their homecoming parade on July 10.

It was raining in Seattle on the day of the parade.

The rain may have kept some people away, but 4th Avenue was still lined with onlookers, many waving signs saying "Thanks." Tickertape filled the air as the soldiers marched smartly down the street.

A large crowd gathered around the reviewing platform, in front of the library. Some waved American flags; others held anti-war signs. A huge banner, prepared by the "G.I.-Civilian Alliance for Peace," read: "Welcome Home -- We'll Stay in the Streets Until All the GIs Are Home." Another large banner, signed by the Young Socialist Alliance, said "BRING ALL THE GI's HOME NOW." Several members of a group identified as Students for Vietnam expressed another point of view, with signs reading: "Win in Vietnam. U.S. Forever. Surrender Never."

Continued on Page 7

Continued from Page 6

Remarks by Magnuson and others were occasionally interrupted by shouts of "bring them all back now." Some in the crowd responded by telling the anti-war demonstrators to "Go home, Commies!" But according to press accounts, such exchanges were limited and the overall mood was celebratory.

The next group of returnees mustered out with little fanfare. The Fourth Battalion, 47th Infantry, Ninth Infantry Division arrived at McChord on July 13, 1969. There was no sendoff in Saigon by top military or South Vietnamese officials. As with the first contingent, the 800 or so men in the battalion were flown to McChord on nine transport planes. Each of the planes was greeted by an Army band and an officer from Fort Lewis. After that, most of the men were on their way within four to six hours, either discharged from the military or released on leave prior to reassignment.

There was no parade, no barbecue, no roses from pretty girls. The news of the battalion's arrival was published on page 17 of The Seattle Times, not Page One. The arrival of subsequent groups of returning soldiers was hardly mentioned in the local newspapers at all.

ALL AVEL REUNION 2022

Washington DC, September or October

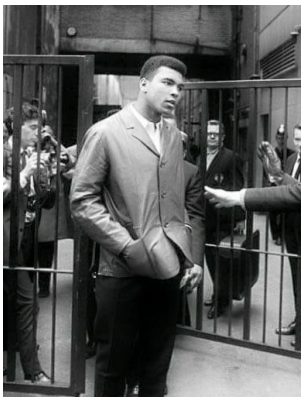
We are still trying to find a venue for the Reunion.

The main issues are: a comped hospitality room that will allow us to supply our own liquor, affordable room rates, free parking, affordable banquet dinner and an affordable bus transport to the Wall. Prices have skyrocketed and with gas prices as they are the cost will go up further.

Russ Mason has been doing the lions share of work on this.

We will keep you posted by email of the future plans for the 2022 Reunion.

"No Viet Cong Ever Called Me Nigger"



Was Muhammad Ali actually the first to use that phrase?

On February 17, 1966, while training for a fight against Ernie Terrell, Muhammad Ali received word that his draft status had been changed from 1-Y (not fit for military draft) to 1-A (the top of the heap). Robert Lypsyte of the New York Times reported that Ali's first reaction was to ask why the local draft board had changed his draft status so drastically. He complained that he was being singled out, and that, according to Ali, he did more for the military and the Vietnam War by paying enormous taxes on his prizefight winnings than he ever would as a soldier. The reporters around him on that day kept asking him questions about it, though, and one of them eventually asked him something about the North Vietnamese, and the members of its military, the Viet Cong.

Ali shrugged and replied, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong." And that phrase flew rapidly around the media at the time, with pro-war people speaking out against Ali, and anti-war protesters taking him as one of their own.

But there's no evidence that Ali followed that reaction with, "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger." That was added a few years later because, like so many anonymous quotes, it has more power when attached to an individual, especially one with a strong and forceful personality like Ali.

"No Viet Cong ever called me nigger" was already being used by black anti-war protesters in early 1966. On February 23, within a week of Ali's "no quarrel" comment (which, remember, was not followed by the n-word comment), "No Viet Cong ever called me nigger" was spotted on a poster at an anti-war demonstration in New York. The phrase appeared repeatedly at various protests during that year. It is unknown who thought of it first (although Stokely Carmichael and John Lewis have been cited as possible originators), but there's no evidence it was Ali.

He did say something very close to it in 1967, when he told an interviewer:

"My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn't put no dogs on me, they didn't rob me of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. … Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail."

But the "no Viet Cong ever called me nigger" quote became so quickly attached to Ali that he used it in a 1977 film, The Greatest, about himself (in which he played himself). By 1977, Ali may have thought that the phrase was his, and it's certainly a fact that the wider culture was already attributing it to him by then.

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