

“Anguish”

Within seconds of turning into the Princetown, NY Town Offices in August 2016, I could see it in the distance. I went to Information to get the location of the names of eight of nine fallen soldiers I needed to visit, then walked the slip of paper to the Virtual Wall. It is a half-size replica of the one that stands in Washington, DC. This one travels the country, touching the hearts of those who know, and the minds of those too young to know.

I needed no help to find Ken Fetter’s name: space 4E-line 38. He was my best friend in high school. A draft deferment allowed me to go to college. I had no way to know the four-year delay would define my life. I was commissioned an infantry lieutenant in 1970, just as the cutbacks began. While I was reading Shakespeare, Ken was pulling leeches out of his skin and sleeping outside in the jungles and rubber plantations around Lai Khe in Binh Duong Province, north of Saigon, at the foot of the Ho Chi Minh trail. He was with the 18th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division. Ken was a rifleman, or grunt, as we were called: twenty-years old and serving a one-year tour. He was in his 10th month, a time when the fear worsens. Before then, in the middle months, you become resigned to anything that might happen. You’ve already watched it happen to so many others, you expect the worst. You let go. But with the end of the tour in view, being “short” as it was called, hope returns, and with it, the fear. Ken was short. But on 20 February 1968, in a firefight that became hand-to-hand, a grenade put his name on space 43E- line 38.

I could also tell Mike Petrashune’s story, or that of Lanny Ladouceur, or Jim McNeilly and the others I knew, but there are really 58,195 other ones, all tragic. The Wall’s black granite is polished and reflective on purpose. We are supposed to see ourselves in the names. It puts it back on us, saying: “Don’t forget how this happened. Tell the truth so it never does again.” It amazes me how little we know about the Vietnam War. We still resist knowing about it. Its truths are as hard and dark as the Wall itself. Americans are not so cruel as to disrespect returning veterans. Yet we did. We were hiding from what we didn’t want to know. The reality of veterans reminded us. It’s not unlike what sometimes befalls parents who lose a

child. Strangely, rather than collapsing into each other's supportive arms, they separate. Their partner's presence becomes the very portraiture of their savage grief. They look away to survive. And so did we. Thankfully, Vietnam veterans are no longer pawns of our national denial. But to the average American, the details of the War are still a strange black hole. We can name famous battles of the Civil War some 150 years ago, but know nothing of Dak To, Pleiku, Con Thien, Ia Drang, or Hamburger Hill. We still hold the War away from us, but can learn none of its lessons from that distance. So there is no final healing.

When it comes to how we got into the morass in the first place, how we slid into one of the darkest periods in American history, we're often left with the empty platitude that we were "protecting our freedom." We only believed we were. The soldiers on the wall are heroes, no less than those of Gettysburg or Anzio, but Vietnam was a mistake. Even then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came to admit it. We must come to terms with this before healing can ever really be complete, and we see the 58,195 names without seeing so much of us reflected back. Until then we will also remain vulnerable to making the same mistakes. The collapse of the Soviet Union dispelled the domino theory myth without our stir, but it seems we still believe that American military power can, if it is great enough, defeat anyone, anywhere, anytime. Not long ago a GOP nominee spoke of carpet bombing the Islamic State and nobody threw a tomato. Our President once suggested killing terrorists's family members. We did both of those in Vietnam, and we did them a lot. We've been trying to find our souls ever since.

We still seem to subscribe to the notion that America can build nations to its liking. In Iraq, that cost us 4,486 more heroes, and nearly 150,000 innocent Iraqi lives. We still think we can defeat an enemy without first understanding him. Ho Chi Minh was foremost a nationalist. Vietnam was fighting the Chinese for its independence 2000 years ago, and continued to fight border battles with China after the Americans were long gone. Ho didn't trust the Soviets either, and there was the French. Vietnam wanted to be free from foreign domination. So Ho reached out to Woodrow Wilson at Versailles, and then to FDR and Truman after WWII. His

Declaration of Independence, drafted in 1945 was in part a verbatim version of our own. But he was rebuffed. He was a communist. The light of history tells us that left alone, he would have likely become like Yugoslavia's Tito: nobody's puppet.

Many today speak of 24% of the world's population as the enemy, ignoring that three million loyal Muslims-Americans are right here, not counting those underground at Arlington, of course. Between 5,000 and 10,000 Muslims serve in our military. We're not sure because many don't dare admit to being Muslim, alone a national embarrassment. Try building a mosque in the wrong part of the USA and see what happens. To make America "great again" is what I fear.

The 58,195 heroes on the Wall did not die protecting our freedom, nor did they die because we're not a great nation. They died because we believed things that were not true, about ourselves and about the world. It was a geopolitical, military, and cultural mistake. "America's tragic flaw," noted Vo Nguyen Giap, the great general who defeated both the French and the Americans, "is that it does not learn from history." The names on The Wall know this. They want us to look at our reflections and know it, too, and then move on to help build a better world. Accepting our mistake, forgiving ourselves for it, vowing to do better, the healing lives there. Our greatness does, too.

— *Michael, Albany*