

## **A Moment of Pause...Our Vietnam Fallen...Never Coming Home** **by Debbie Neece, Bartlesville Area History Museum**

The Vietnam War Memorial at Washington D.C. is a place of peaceful reflection meant to bring visitors emotional solace...a place to publicly mourn among others who share painful emptiness. At the height of visitation, in 2015, a record 5.6 million visitors held at least one thing in common...loss...each comforting and assisting another as one family. Visitors place their hand over the engraved letters that spell the name of a lost family member as if to touch the heart of a soul who left home with courage and fell into the arms of angels. Seeing ones self-reflection beaming from the black granite wall must be as heart wrenching as the day word was received of the death.

From 1,400 designs submitted into a national competition, the design of 21-year-old Yale University student, Maya Lin, was selected as finalist for the Vietnam War Memorial. Ground broke March 1982 and the site was dedicated in November as part of a five-day Veteran's Day ceremony with 57,939 names listed on the wall. According to the National Parks Service, by 2017, that number grew to 58,318 including an estimated 1,500 Missing in Action heroes. The Memorial also brings comfort and closure to anguishing families forever searching for loved ones who may never come home.



As if to embrace visitors, the two arms of the wall reach 246.75 feet in each direction...the western wall towards the Lincoln Memorial and the eastern wall towards the Washington Monument. There are tens of thousands memorial offerings annually left at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. ranging from letters to photos to dog tags which are archived at the Vietnam Veteran Memorial Collections operated by the National Parks Service. In 1995, a custom Harley Davidson Motorcycle, built from donated parts and assembled as a labor of



love, was left at the Memorial as a tribute to the fallen heroes from the "people of Wisconsin." That Memorial Day weekend, 106 motorcyclists traveled to the Vietnam War Memorial to present the "chopper" which was graced with a "HERO" license plate, custom paint scenes and the dog tags of Wisconsin's 37 fallen heroes.







The U.S. was involved in the support and training of Vietnamese freedom fighters as early as 1947 when President Truman sent planes, jeeps and military advisors as part of a multimillion dollar aid package in the fight against communism. The political support policy continued though the presidencies of Eisenhower and Kennedy evolving into a quagmire which grabbed and held fast to America before the explosion of war during Johnson, Nixon and Ford.

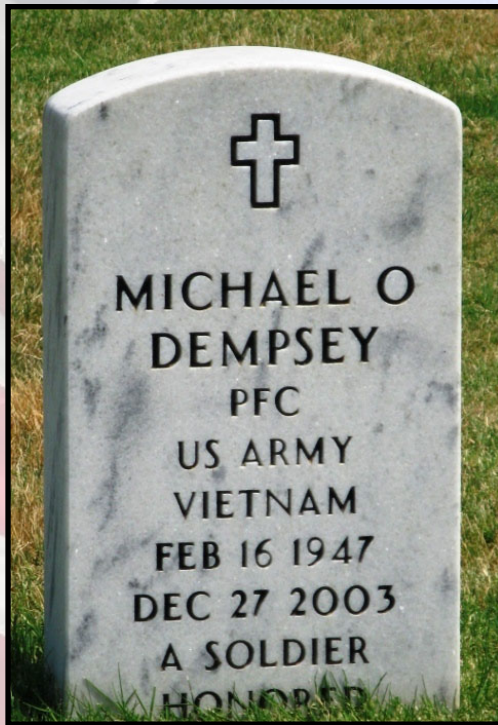
Young men with the least to gain faced a battle they saw with no reason or goal; they donned their courage 24 hours a day, marched towards survival and returned to upheaval in America. Vietnam was the first televised war and the knowledge divided our nation, a division not experienced since the Civil War. After WWI and WWII, our service men returned to a hero's welcome. Not so for our Vietnam servicemen who found protests in the streets, not celebratory parades.





The Vietnam War ending was as fluid as the beginning. While the United States withdrew troops from Vietnam in 1973 after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War did not end until the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Even more confusing, Congress considers May 7, 1975 as the end of the Vietnam War because, on that date, President Gerald Ford announced the end of the Vietnam Era.

The Vietnam War Memorial was placed as a symbol of healing; however, not all Vietnam heroes are named on the Vietnam Memorial. Some returned home and dealt with the terror of war until their dying day.



There is a comradeship among our service personnel...a trust not to be broken...a brotherhood. Beyond the twenty-two Washington County fallen servicemen who sacrificed their lives during the Vietnam War, there were many who survived and live among us quietly suffering. One such hero was Specialist Fourth Class Michael Otis Dempsey, a 1966 graduate of Bartlesville's College High School. After graduation, Dempsey attended Northeastern State College in Tahlequah before entering the service. On September 5, 1968, in the face of an intense hail of automatic gunfire, Dempsey set his own life aside to rescue casualties.

A military document detailed the heroic events for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart. However, the depth of valor Specialist Mike Dempsey exhibited was much more exceptional. Fighting an ongoing battle, Dempsey disabled several enemy foxholes with grenades on his rescue mission to leave no man behind. Finding a soldier deceased on his second rescue attempt, Dempsey returned a third time with a rope to pull the lifeless soldier and his gear back to safety...back to the brotherhood...home to a grieving family.

Mike Dempsey survived the Vietnam War and returned home as did many other soldiers. But the anguish of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) haunted his existence creating a distance from family and most friends. When Michael Otis Dempsey died December 27, 2003, he was quietly buried in the Fort Gibson National Cemetery. Like other PTSD veterans, Dempsey succumbed to the struggle for normalcy after he sacrificed for this nation but was not recognized on the Vietnam Memorial Wall with the fallen.

In 2008, the Department of Defense Vietnam War Commemoration Fund was established to provide a 13-year moment of pause in recognition of all Vietnam veterans. On May 25, 2012, the president signed a proclamation declaring May 28, 2012 through November 11, 2025 as the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Vietnam War in appreciation of all Vietnam Veterans, their families and our fallen heroes.

As the last WWI and WWII veterans who fought for our freedoms quietly pass from this life, our Vietnam War veterans walk among us. Some proudly wear ball caps telling you of their service, others walking silently with the unhealed wounds of war.

This Memorial Day please take a moment of pause to pray for our nation's veterans, fallen heroes and the gift of sacrifice from their families.