

At The Wall: A reminder of bonds forged in combat

As I slowly walked past the endless litany of names etched into the black marble walls, I felt engulfed by the presence of these more than 58,000 men, almost all of whom I had never met during my six years in Vietnam.

As I stood at the base of the monument and stared into the highly polished façade, I could see my reflection in the stone surface. My image appeared to be behind the actual engraving of the names. It was as if The Wall were drawing me deeper into it, drawing me past those names and back into Vietnam, back to 1969 and the Mekong Delta. And in my mind, I could again hear that ubiquitous sound of the helicopter rotor blades beating the air — thump... thump... thump... thump — and the voices crackling over the radio:

"Delta Base, Delta Base, this is Dust Off Four-Four, approaching your location!"

One of the South Vietnamese outposts had been overrun by the Viet Cong, and all radio contact had been lost. It was feared that all of the troops there had been killed or wounded. The only way into this remote outpost was by helicopter, and I was the only adviser who knew how to find it on such a dark, almost moonless, night. The U.S. Army medical-evacuation chopper was coming to pick me up — Americans going to rescue



World Food Prize Foundation.

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Vietnamese soldiers we had never met. I could hear myself answer: *"Roger, Dust Off, this is Delta Six, ready for pickup."*

We flew at tree-top level down a canal with only a sliver of moonlight to help illuminate the sky. At last, I saw the break in the tree line through which I knew we would find the outpost. As I guided the pilot into the landing zone, we saw the wounded and dead everywhere. Fearing that enemy troops might still be nearby who could bring us under fire, we loaded all of the wounded onto the helicopter and then were quickly airborne, now a lifesaving flight en route to a hospital. I could still recall my message on the radio:

"Vinh Long, Vinh Long, Delta Six, coming to your location with multiple wounded."

As I continued looking into The Wall, my mind was next taken back to 1977, when the war was over, and I had flown into Hanoi with the first ever POW-MIA delegation on a mission to recover the bodies of our fallen fellow Americans. In combat,

if Americans were in danger or needed help, you went, no questions asked. It didn't matter that you had never met them. It didn't matter whether they were black or white, young or old. All that mattered was that they were Americans and needed your help. That commitment continued in death. These men had given the ultimate sacrifice for their country. Our duty, in the capital of our former enemy, was to bring them home.

At The Wall, I felt the same overwhelming sense of kinship and commitment that I experienced the day we left Hanoi, as I stood on the tarmac as part of the honor guard and heard the words:

"Present arms!"

And with my hand over my heart, I saluted as the caskets of now no-longer-missing service men were carried one by one onto the plane — men I had never known in life, but whose names were on The Wall.

As I left The Wall that day, it occurred to me that one of the great lessons of that war was that Americans who served in combat share a great bond. It's the commitment we made, whether in life or in death, to never abandon one another.

The Vietnam Memorial is a powerful symbol of that enduring commitment that united us in battle, just as it continues to unite us now, long after the battle ended.

Honor the fallen by caring for disabled vets

Today, Memorial Day, beloved sons and daughters, devoted husbands and wives, loving mothers and fathers, cherished brothers and sisters, and best buddies will be at the forefront of families' thoughts throughout the nation as America honors the men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice.

They shed their blood for the freedoms we so often take for granted. We will remember them all, from the Greatest Generation to the latest generation.

To their families, these heroes, as the Ode of Remembrance says, "shall



America, www.pva.org.

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free, but to live free with dignity.

We fight for:

- A nation where veterans' benefits and health care are fully funded. The administration's budget is short by \$3 billion in key areas such as health care, prosthetics research, benefits processing and the construction of new hospitals and clinics. Congress appears to be

achieve new treatments and cures. The truth is: That dream of walking again for many is within our grasp. To achieve the breakthroughs, we need more investment — now.

We are winning this fight to help all veterans and their families get access to all of the things they need to thrive. Since Paralyzed Veterans of America was founded 62 years ago after World War II, we have fought for and secured more than \$3 billion in benefits and tens of billions in crucial health-care funding. We led the way for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, an important first step