



UNIQUELY PERSONAL REMEMBRANCES

Visitors began leaving tokens of remembrance at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, while it was still under construction. Flags and flowers historically have decorated veterans' monuments, but the presence of many other mementos is unique to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The first, a Purple Heart, was thrown by a Vietnam veteran into the wet cement of the Memorial's foundation.

Since then, visitors from at home and abroad have left more than 25,000 keepsakes at the Memorial, collected daily by National Park Service rangers. Each has its own story, often known only to the donor. This collection of messages and gifts from the heart was created by relatives, former comrades-in-arms, friends, neighbors, and members of civic and fraternal organizations. They express the love, grief, and pain associated with the 58,220 names on the Memorial's 140 black granite panels. Objects left at The Wall can be seen in the Smithsonian exhibition

This outpouring occurs year round, particularly at Christmas, Memorial Day, July 4th, and Veterans Day. The gifts also commemorate birthdays of dead and missing veterans and other days of personal importance. This selection of remembrances provides us an opportunity to ponder the continuing impact of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the generation that lived through that conflict.

OFFERINGS AT THE WALL

By Don Moser

Photographs by Rick Vargas

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Near the base of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, comrades and loved ones leave their poignant tokens of remembrance.

"In the fall of 1982, a U.S. Navy officer walked up to the trench where the concrete for the foundation of The Wall was being poured. He stood over the trench for a moment, then tossed something into it and saluted. A workman asked him what he was doing. He said he was giving his dead brother's Purple Heart to The Wall. That was the first offering."

The story is told in a book about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, *Offerings at The Wall*, released Turner Publishing Inc. The photographs in the book record some of the 30,000 objects and letters that have been placed at The Wall, as if at a shrine, by relatives and comrades of the men and women there memorialized.

These gifts of remembrance are collected each day by volunteers and preserved by the National Park Service in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection, housed in a climate-controlled repository where the mementos lie near such historic artifacts as the life mask of Abraham Lincoln.



Some of the offerings were left with poems or letters (letters that were sealed will always remain so), but others bear meanings known only to those who offered them: a Bible, a fishing float, service ribbons, a sock for an amputee's stump, a popsicle stick, four mortarboard tassels, a foil wrapper from a Hershey's Kiss. In his eloquent introduction to the book, Thomas B. Allen writes that The Wall" became a place for wishes, for futures that could not be.

Tucked into a wreath are the things of an imagined life: new baby shoes for a baby who never would be, the pencils and crayons for a first day of kindergarten that never would be, champagne glasses to toast a wedding anniversary that never would be, ornaments for a Christmas tree that never would be." Someone left five cards, a royal flush for a poker game that never would be played. And a soldier left a photograph of a North Vietnamese man with a young girl, along with a note: "Dear Sir: For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day that we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam. Why you did not take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long. . . . Forgive me for taking your life."

And the boots. So intimately shaped by those who wore them, yet so universal-the familiar black leather and tough green fabric, the lugged soles bearing the memory of the earth of the Delta or Con Thien-that they seem a symbol for the whole process of conflict and healing.

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