

# Parade's a reminder that Vietnam did touch us all

This has been quite a week.

Bike Safety Week. Canada-U.S. Goodwill Week. Consumer Protection Week. Jewish Heritage Week. Keep America Beautiful Week. National Coin Week. National YWCA Week. Professional Secretaries Week. National Volunteer Week.

Perhaps you missed out on some of those. It also is quite a year.

Forty years since the end of World War II, and 10 since the end of the Vietnam War.

Maybe you missed out on those, too. Guess again.

If you weren't there with your body or that of a loved one, you're there now with your mind, your emotions and your soul.

Neither conflict has ever ended. I wonder if they ever will, for some people are still fighting the Civil War more than 100 years later.

World War II lives on daily all over the globe, with its legacy of geography and relationships and words, both spoken and written.

You could be in for another routine day in Kalamazoo, except for that concentration camp number on your arm. Or you could be reacting to President Reagan's plan to visit a German military cemetery.

It still gets us all where we live, in our minds, our emotions, our souls. Forty years later.

Similarly, the Vietnam War is still with us, whether we're in Ho Chi Minh City or stateside, and many a place in between.

You can see it in our wheelchairs, our faces, our restaurant menus, our cemeteries, our movies and our work places, across this land and too many others.

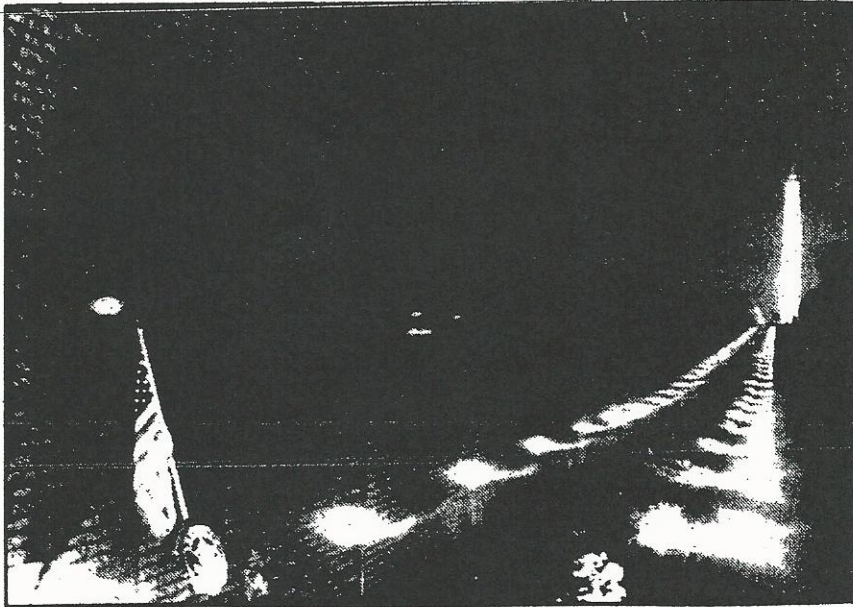
It is especially noticeable in Washington, D.C., where it all started.

I was not in Vietnam, nor was my family, or any close friends.

But I was in Washington recently and the one place I wanted to see was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I had seen the district's other famous memorials, but not this two-and-a-half-year-old symbol.

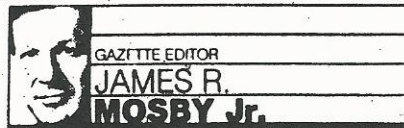
It affected me as I am sure it has others, drawing me into its powerful spell before I knew it. I can't imagine visiting it and leaving unattached from the war, or its victims.

My thoughts imagined being in Vietnam, up and down hills, scraping through the hot jungles and paddies, gasping for water or air or a medic. I imagined being in the homes of those 58,000 dead men and women. I wondered what it must be like for their mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and brothers and sisters.



Lights play on Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

AP file photo



Fifty-eight thousand. Whether you fought the war or protested it, you can't help but be affected by the horror of such loss of life.

Perhaps worse, if that's possible, I thought of the families of the 1,300 still unaccounted for. What a hideous fate, for them all.

I felt almost out of place, next to those around me who were privately grieving, praying and remembering in such a public place.

A man nearby seemed concerned. He couldn't find a buddy's name engraved on the memorial. He had been there when he died. He quickly sought out a park ranger with a complete list. Their conversation faded, and I don't know the outcome.

Another loved one gently placed a flower by a name carved in the granite.

Others tenderly touched the name of another dead man with the tips of their fingers, pausing to capture the moment forever.

A family clustered around a piece of paper they placed over a name and lightly penciled back and forth across it, duplicating the engraved name to take home.

It dawned on me I could see myself reflected in the granite. All of us could. The people of 1985 looking at the people of 1959-75.

I moved along, awed and saddened anew by the enormous list of names. Then, my eyes darted to the name Mosby. Statue Mosby his name was. Fifty-eight thousand names and my eyes zero in on a Mosby in a matter of minutes. Weird.

I had to find the official alphabetical listing. There were two Mosbys killed in Vietnam. One from New York, the other from Los Angeles. Born within four months of one another, they also died within four months of each other.

Our group moved on to an nearby statue of three soldiers, created to appease some who didn't like the granite walls.

I hadn't seen any need for the statue when it was proposed because the walls seemed appropriate. But once I saw it, and how it was placed, as if watching over dead compatriots, I thought it quite fitting.

I wish we could have stayed longer. Already, I want to go back.

Meanwhile, there are other ways, some closer to home, that Vietnam lives on, sometimes in a most therapeutic way. We need to get Saigon out of our system, and focus on the present and the future, having learned some costly lessons together.

One of those steps off from the corner of Portage and Lovell streets at 2 this afternoon, an idea of Tom and Janice Emig, to whom I say, "Thanks, we need this."

They weren't in Vietnam, either. But they put their minds and emotions and souls together, and got others to do the same.

So, we'll have "The Parade that Never Was" in Kalamazoo today, finally, saluting the Vietnam veterans.

For some, it's easy to say they don't deserve it. But how many of us, really, would have become conscientious objectors, or run off to Canada? Almost all of us would have gone right into the same rice paddies since our country was at war.

It wasn't easy to go, it wasn't easy to be a CO, it wasn't easy to head for Canada and it wasn't easy to protest. And, a decade tells us, it isn't easy to end it.

All of us, those who served in the war, those who supported it, those who tolerated it and those who protested it, need to move on.

Let's all participate, and get our minds and emotions and souls together in and around that parade this afternoon. It can help us get over the hump, and move forward.

I just pray we won't need to do this all over again in 1995, be it for Nicaragua or El Salvador or Lebanon, or whatever's next.