

# More than Names on the Wall

By Jonathan Copsey / STAFF

There are 58,209 names listed on that black granite wall. 58,209 soldiers who gave their lives fighting a war that many of them did not understand until they set foot in the jungles of Vietnam. A war that many do not understand to this day.

Among those who died were 1,582 Georgians, including four Alpharetans and many more from nearby areas.

With the construction of the 75 meter-long Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington D.C., the war became more than just a period in history; it became names. The names of every fallen American soldier adorn the wall that acts so much as a figurative grave not only for the fallen, but also for the emotions and feelings surrounding the conflict.

For the families of those killed during the conflict, the wall acts as a personal memorial for their loved ones. To run a finger over each name – each son and brother, daughter and sister, husband and father, wife and mother – is to connect with those who died in a foreign land not so long ago.

But no matter how beautiful a design or how moving seeing an engraving may be, nothing is more powerful than the stories to be told along with those names. The stories that give more than a regiment number and date, but of who it was who gave his life and, perhaps more impor-

tantly, why? There are lessons to be learned from conflict and it is the duty of those left behind to tell it for those who died; it is the responsibility of those who did not live it to listen.

For the dead are much more than just names on a wall.

## PRIVATE TOMMY J. HOLTZCLAW III

Tommy was just 17 when he signed up for the marines in March of 1966. His name is on panel 18E of the wall.

The graduate of O'Keefe High School

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(now part of Georgia Tech) needed his parents' permission to sign up, but as he would be 18 in April, he convinced them to enlist him. They did not want to send their smart, popular, eldest son off to war, but he was determined. And so he went to boot camp and then, on December 15, 1966, he shipped out to Vietnam.

Tommy, who grew up in northern Atlanta, wrote home almost every day, and it is his letters that retell his story. His nieces, Terri Walker and Connie Hughes, collected his letters and turned them into a book titled "Letters From Tommy J."

"I didn't know a lot about the Vietnam War until I started working on this," said Walker, who never knew her Uncle Tommy. She and her sister were only toddlers when he was killed, and the family never spoke about him.

"When we were growing up, it was kind of an unspoken rule that we would not talk of Tommy J.," Walker said. "We had an old Victrola in our living room that was covered in purple velvet, and on top of it was a picture of Tommy in his high school graduation, one of him in uniform and some pictures from the funeral. In my grandmother's house there were a couple of pictures, and when you asked, 'Who was that?' nobody wanted to talk about it. We grew up with this image that that was our uncle and he was killed in Vietnam... And we learned to quit asking."

It was only after Tommy's mother died that the letters he wrote home were finally found among her possessions.

"When I started reading these letters from him, he started coming to life. But the sad part about it was that every day I brought him alive he still died."

Through his letters, a picture of Tommy formed in the minds of his nieces. He was very proud of the work he and his fellow soldiers were doing in the steaming jungles of Asia, firmly believing in the mission and the inevitable success of the West, but the resentment at home obviously bothered him.

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## DIGNITY AND HONOR FOR THOSE WHO DIED

The Dignity Memorial Vietnam Wall, a replica of the Vietnam Memorial wall in Washington, D.C., travels around the country providing comfort and closure to the many veterans and their families who cannot make the trip to D.C. to see the real thing. Constructed in 1990, the mobile wall has visited over 200 cities.

Green Lawn Cemetery in Roswell is part of the national network of cemeteries that house the wall on its tour. The groundbreaking ceremony for the wall was held in May with the footprint of the wall lined by small flags.

"The main reason," said Green Lawn Cemetery manager Tony Papel, "was of course to recognize those veterans who fought in Vietnam for the sacrifices they made to protect our country, our freedoms and the freedoms of people they never met or knew."

Papel knows firsthand the kinds of emotions that appear when faced with the black granite wall. "The replica has the same effect on people as the original. I saw it up in Illinois when I went up there for training. It's a large wall. It's very big. It exudes the same emotions, even though it's a replica, that the original does because I saw several veterans there moved to tears by seeing their friend's name on this wall as well.

"Anytime anybody is recognized for the services they provided and giving their life for something they believed in," Papel continued, "especially this war in particular – the whole history behind it and how the vets were received when the war was over – there really didn't seem to be any closure for them until this wall was created in Washington, D.C., because there was really nothing there for them to go to and express their emotions at. We expect the emotions to be just as real at this wall as it would be if the people traveled to Washington, D.C."

The wall will be arriving in Roswell on July 1 as part of a ceremonial motorcade at 2 p.m. and it will be assembled during the afternoon. The July 4 ceremonies begin Friday at 10 a.m. and continue over the weekend with many vigils and services, notably a candlelight service at 9 p.m. Friday night. The wall will be open for visitation all weekend, 24 hours a day. The final ceremony will take place Sunday at 5 p.m.



The mobile Vietnam Memorial wall will be in Roswell through July 6.