

Committee on Resources

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Subcommittee on National Parks,

Recreation, and Public Lands

Legislative Field Hearing on H.R. 1442

By chance I was in Saigon in July 1959 as a correspondent for Time when I heard that two U.S. military advisers had been killed at Bien Hoa, a South Vietnamese army camp about 25 miles north of the city. I quickly drove to the base through the torrid tropical heat, gathered the details and wrote a report of the incident. It earned only a couple of paragraphs in the magazine - all the minor event deserved.

But, looking back, it was far more significant than I imagined. I had witnessed the opening shot of a war that would drag on for the next 14 years - the longest in our history and our only defeat. Nor did I envision that the names of the slain men, Major Dale Buis and Master Sergeant Chester Ovnand, would ultimately head the roster of more than 58,000 others engraved on the poignant Memorial Wall in Washington.

Perhaps those heroes would be forgotten if The Wall had not been built. The struggle, the most divisive since the Civil War, ripped the country apart. Returning veterans were often castigated by supporters of the conflict for its failures, or vilified by its critics of committing atrocities. The accusations were despicable. The troops who fought and died in Vietnam were not responsible for the involvement in Southeast Asia. The architects of the venture were politicians and senior officials, some of whom have conceded that it was a mistake.

The Wall has dramatically changed public opinion. Since its construction, Americans of widely divergent views have come to the realization that the servicemen were fulfilling their duty. This reassessment is mirrored in the fact that the monument is the most visited in the nation's capital. So it stands as a vivid symbol of both unity and redemption. Vietnam is behind us, but it reminds us of one of the most tragic experiences in our country's experience.

To their credit, its founders and patrons are now engaged in several ambitious projects that reach beyond the monument itself. One of the most important is the effort to educate young Americans on the war. Teachers have been provided with curriculums and other materials that will enable them to instruct their students, either directly or through the Internet. The response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive, and I am proud of the role I played in its formulation.

This, however, is just one part of the outreach. Today, so many of the visitors to the Memorial are far too young to recall the events of the Vietnam War themselves. A visitor center on the site of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial would go far in illustrating the human toll of this period in history. This visitor center would serve to create a context for the existence of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, presenting a historical background of the conflict and the subsequent construction of the Memorial. The names on The Wall represent not only a period in time that cannot be ignored, but tributes to individuals that will forever be caught in that era.

I closely observed the complex and astounding events that transpired throughout the Vietnam War. As an historian and journalist, I believe the visitor center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is unequivocally necessary in providing a proper educational experience for all visitors. With several million visitors to the Memorial each year, the potential to make an impact on these people is an opportunity that cannot go untapped. The effort is well worth ensuring that each visitor walks away with a better understanding of the Memorial and our nation's history for generations to come.

The Wall was originally intended to commemorate the dead, and it has succeeded admirably. But with the visitor center here, on this very site, it will transcend that function to become an instrument of goodwill and that elusive dream - peace on earth.

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