The Healing Begins

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Inc., a nonprofit charitable organization formed to establish the memorial, was the idea of Jan Scruggs, a former infantry corporal during the war. It was incorporated on April 27, 1979, by a group of Vietnam veterans in Washington, D.C. The founders wanted Vietnam veterans to have a tangible symbol of recognition from American society. They early on realized that whatever design would ultimately result, four basic criteria had to be met: (1) that it be reflective and contemplative in character, (2) that it harmonize with its surroundings, especially the neighboring national memorials, (3) that it contain the names of all who died or remain missing, and (4) that it make no political statement about the war. By separating the issue of those who served in Vietnam from that of U.S. policy in the war, the group hoped to begin a process of national reconciliation.

(Left) To veterans and their loved ones, the healing process often involves leaving mementos at the wall.

Names Become the Memorial

Maya Ying Lin conceived her design as creating a park within a park—a quiet protected place unto itself, yet harmonious with the site. To achieve this effect she chose polished black granite for the walls. Its mirrorlike surface reflects the surrounding trees, lawns, monuments, and the people looking for names. The memorial's walls point to the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The 58,209 names are inscribed in chronological order of the date of casualty, showing the war as a series of individual human sacrifices and giving each name a special place in history. "The names would become the memorial," Lin said.

The names begin at the vertex of the walls below the date of the first casualty and continue to the end of the east wall. They resume at the tip of the west wall, ending at the vertex above the date of the last death. With the meeting of the beginning and ending, a major epoch in American history is denoted. Each name is preceded on the west wall or followed on the east wall by one of two symbols: a diamond or a cross. The diamond denotes that the individual's death was confirmed. The approximately 1,150 persons whose names are designated by the cross were either missing or prisoners at the end of the war and remain missing and unaccounted for. If a person returns alive, a circle, as a symbol of life, will be inscribed around the cross. In the event an individual's remains are returned or are otherwise accounted for, the diamond will be superimposed over the cross.

Some Facts About the Memorial
The walls are 246.75 feet long and the angle at the vertex is 125°12'. There are 140 pilings with the average depth to bedrock being 35 feet. The height of the walls at the vertex is 10.1 feet. The granite comes from Bangalore, India; it was cut and fabricated at Barre, Vermont. The names were grit blasted in Memphis, Tennessee, with the height of individual letters being 0.53 inch and the depth, 0.038 inch.

Statue © F.E. Hart and VWMF 1984

The Faces of Honor

Sculptor Frederick Hart's goal was to create a moving evocation of the experience and service of the Vietnam veteran. He has described it as follows: "They wear it on their uniform and carry the equipment of war; they are young. The contrast between the innocence of their youth and the weapons of war underscores the poignancy of their sacrifice. There is about them the physical contact and sense of unity that bespeaks the bonds of love and sacrifice that is the nature of men at war....Their strength and their vulnerability are both evident." The flag flies from a 60-foot staff. The base contains the emblems of the five services. The sculpture and flag form an entrance plaza.

Dedicated on November 11, 1993, as part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Vietnam Women's Memorial honors the women of the U.S. Armed Forces who took part in the war. The statue was sculpted by Glenna Goodacre and depicts three women coming to the aid of a fallen soldier. It recalls the courage and sacrifice of all women who served. Planted around the memorial are eight yellowwood trees—a living tribute to the eight servicewomen killed in action while in Vietnam.

Robert Shafer