

The Fall of Saigon and the Aftermath

Introduction

The supporters of the U.S. war effort hoped to see a victorious, democratic South Vietnam standing firm against aggression from the north. The people who opposed the war hoped to see a unified Vietnam, its people living in democratic union within its borders and in peace with all its neighbors. It is another irony of this war that neither side got what it wished for. What happened was more complicated.

The Fall of Saigon

By the spring of 1975 the United States had been out of Vietnam for two years. It had left behind a seemingly strong and well-equipped South Vietnamese army, but by early 1975 the army had become a disorganized remnant, plagued by decreasing financial aid from the United States, internal corruption, desertion and poor morale. Underpaid and led by corrupt officers, the soldiers often turned their guns on their own countrymen.

Throughout 1974, North Vietnam and the Vietcong had kept up a steady offensive that slowly gained territory and weakened the capacity of the ARVN to wage war. In the spring of 1975, North Vietnam launched its final offensive. The ARVN crumbled. On April 30, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon and smashed the gates to the presidential palace. At the cost of over a million lives, Vietnam was united again.

Reeducation and the "Boat People"

Victorious in battle, the North Vietnamese immediately set about remaking South Vietnamese society. The name of Saigon was changed to Ho Chi Minh City. Government officials and others who had served the South Vietnamese government or army were sent off to "reeducation" centers, where they were indoctrinated in the Communistic way of thinking. Some returned to their families quickly. Others never returned, dying of disease or by explosion when they were forced to clear mines or undetonated bombs left from the war. Even members of the Vietcong, supposedly in charge of the government, were slowly edged out of power in favor of Communist officials from the north. As one former Vietcong leader wrote, "Now, with total power in their [the North Vietnamese] hands, they began to show their cards in the most brutal fashion." It began to look less like a "liberation" and more like an outright conquest.

Adding to the suffering were two massive waves of South Vietnamese refugees trying to leave their country. The first wave consisted of about 130,000 people, high government officials and others who had enthusiastically supported Western influence in South Vietnam and were fleeing the approaching Communists. Many settled in the United States.

In 1977 a more tragic exodus began, that of 1.4 million South Vietnamese who were ethnically Chinese. Called *Hoa* by the Vietnamese, they had long prospered as bankers and small-business owners. The Communist government began to persecute them in 1976, depriving them of their right to make a living. The *Hoa* fled the country, overcrowded in leaky boats with appalling physical conditions. Some boats sank at sea; others were boarded and plundered by pirates. Countries in the area refused to grant many of these "boat people" refuge, and squalid, dirty refugee camps were built to house them. Those successful at reaching and entering the United States did not find an end to their troubles. They found instead an American public trying to forget Vietnam; they faced discrimination and racial attacks by Americans who did not want them here.

Agent Orange and the MIA Issue

The Vietnam conflict continued to haunt the American people. Two of the most painful issues were the use of Agent Orange and the servicemen who were listed as missing in action (MIAs).

Of the many chemical weapons used in Vietnam by the United States, one of the most widespread was the herbicide Agent Orange. From 1965 to 1971, American planes sprayed more than 96 million pounds of it over the thick forests of Vietnam, and hundreds of thousands of United States soldiers were exposed to it. The soldiers remember clouds of Agent Orange swirling around them, and they also took showers and drank water from drums that had held the chemical. However, the soldiers were assured that the chemical would have little effect on humans.

In the 1970s, scientists began to publish reports that Agent Orange did indeed harm human beings. Veterans began showing chronic skin conditions, respiratory diseases, loss of hearing and vision, and an increased incidence of cancer. One veteran, dying of cancer, said, "I got killed in Vietnam and didn't know it." The children of Vietnam veterans also showed an increased risk of birth defects.

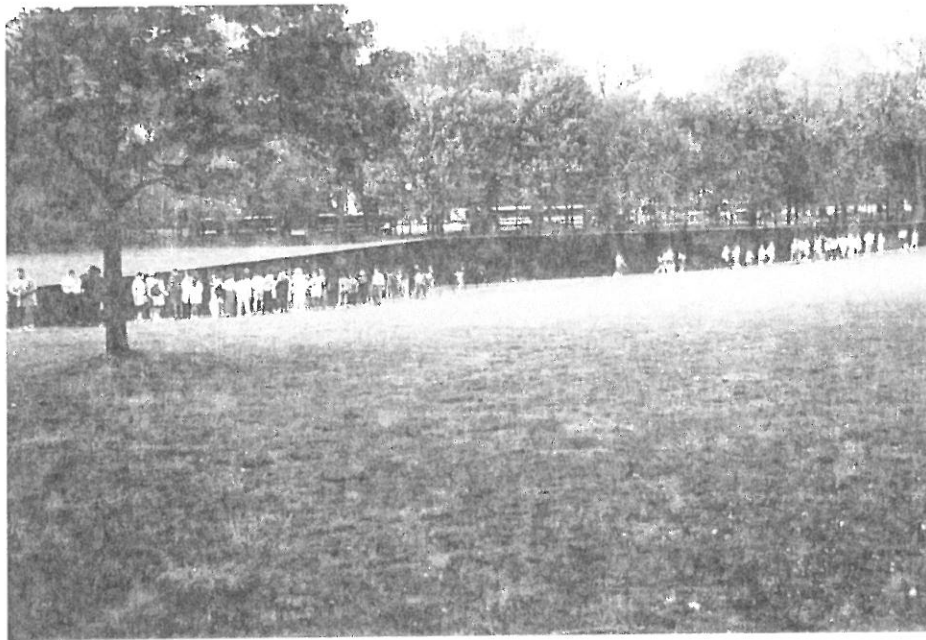
Government response to this issue was slow. In 1978, a veteran sued Dow Chemical, the maker of Agent Orange. Twenty-thousand other veterans joined the suit, which was settled in 1984, but the damage was done.

A second painful reminder of the war was the MIA issue — 2,477 U.S. servicemen who were still not accounted for when the supposedly last POW was returned. The families of the MIAs pressed Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter for a full accounting of the MIAs, which was made difficult by the fact that after 1975 the United States had no diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Negotiations proceeded at a snail's pace: periodically Vietnam would release the remains of a few servicemen, usually in the hope of gaining some concessions from the United States.

Supporters of the search for MIAs put bumper stickers on their cars reading, "MIAs — We will never forget." Delegations from the United States, and even some individual family members, were granted permission by Vietnam to enter the country and search for remains. Pictures were produced purporting to show that MIAs were still being held in POW camps in Laos or Vietnam; others claimed the pictures were fakes and that no U.S. servicemen were left alive in Vietnam.

The Dedication of the Wall

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a growing feeling that the United States



The Vietnam Memorial, Washington, D.C. *Author's photo*

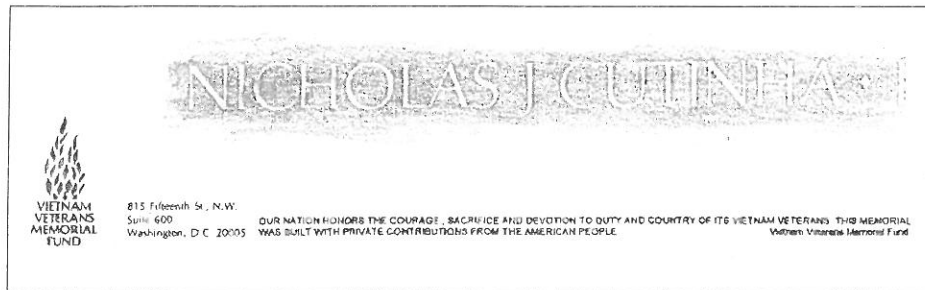
needed to recognize the sacrifices of Vietnam veterans by building a memorial to those who had served and died. The movement was led by former soldier Jan Scruggs, who began a fund by selling some of his own land. Others contributed; soon the idea had the support of former President Gerald Ford and President Jimmy Carter.

In 1981, in an open competition, more than 1,400 people submitted designs for the memorial. The design of Maya Lin, a young architecture student of Asian descent, was selected. Her design was deceptively simple: two long rows of polished black granite with the names of every American killed in Vietnam etched into them. The design became a center of controversy. One writer claimed the memorial would be "pointedly insulting to the sacrifices made for their country by Vietnam veterans." Another wrote in support of the design: "A great work of art doesn't *tell* you what to think — it *makes* you think."

The memorial was dedicated on Veterans Day, November 11, 1982. More than 150,000 veterans and countless others came to Washington for the event. The occasion produced a great outpouring of emotion, from veterans and non-veterans alike. "This is the Vietnam veterans' day in the sun," said Jan Scruggs, whose determination had made the day possible. One person spoke about the wall itself: "I don't know what it is. . . . you have to touch it. There's something about touching it."

Vietnam in 1995

In 1995, Vietnam had been reunified for twenty years. It still has one of the largest standing armies in the world, yet the standard of living of its people lags far behind that of most nations in Asia. It does not have democratic elections or a free press. Many refugees from Vietnam have gone on to make successful new lives in their new homes, yet thousands still languish in temporary refugee camps. While most U.S. veterans have successfully gone



Pencil rubbing (Made by the author) of Medal of Honor recipient's name taken from the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. See document #10 for full-size rubbing and Cuthina's award.

on with their lives — three are members of the United States Senate — some are still suffering such aftereffects of the war as health problems and psychological difficulties.

In July of 1995, President Clinton formally recognized the existence of Vietnam as a unified nation, and the two countries finally exchanged ambassadors. In July of that year, the American flag was raised at the new United States embassy in Hanoi. United States citizens are now able to travel freely to Vietnam.

Every day over ten thousand people visit the Vietnam Memorial. They walk past the wall, the sculpture of three American servicemen, and the just-completed sculpture dedicated to the women who served in Vietnam as nurses and the eight nurses who died there. Just beside the memorial is a row of souvenir and T-shirt stands, some of them still displaying messages about the MIAs. If you walk along the wall you can count 55,088 names, and if you look directly at the wall you will see, between the names inscribed there, your own reflection. ■