

Nexus
3/11/97



A Trip to the Wall

THE CHILDREN

They barely remember anything about the war, but about 50 UCSB students traveled to Washington D.C.'s Vietnam Veterans Memorial and found more than their reflections in the Wall.

By Eddie Sanders

Holding hands in a circle, about 50 students stand solemnly before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Behind them, the V-shaped black marble wall bears the names of the 58,022 American men and women killed in the war.

Part of a UCSB class on the impact of Vietnam on American society, these students made the 3,000-mile journey for the sole purpose of seeing this controversial "American touchstone," which has become the focal point for the Vietnam generation.

One of the students begins by reading a name aloud. The group waits a moment, and then another student reads a second name. Before a third name is announced, several people in the group begin to cry. And by the time the entire list of about 20 names is completed, nearly everyone in the group is in tears.

The names are of UCSB alumni and friends and relatives of students in the class. Some of the students were unable to make the trip, but they submitted names to be remembered at the Wall.

After the ceremony is over, students break their circle and begin to hug one another. They were strangers a day earlier, but now they feel united by a common bond.

With their "part field trip, part pilgrimage" to Washington D.C. last week, these students say their religious studies course has turned into a religious experience itself.

Though they barely remember Vietnam, the students say they are continuing the fight in their minds. And the more they learn about the war, the more upsetting they find it. It is a struggle that has brought them to the Wall.

Members of the group have come for different reasons. Some of their parents fought in the war and some protested against it. Some died in Vietnam and others didn't get involved at all.

But today, the issue that once divided American society has brought these students together to mourn for the tragedy of the war.

"We have come here today to learn about the memorial," says Professor Walter Capps, who is teaching the course with former Nebraska governor and Vietnam veteran Robert Kerrey.

"We have come to learn together and to learn from each other," he tells the students.

Capps, who recently left his post as head of the state branch of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is credited with taking one of the most controversial events in American history and presenting it at a humanistic level that more than 900 students can collectively share. His class, which has received national attention, is one of the largest in the UC system.

To Capps, the students' reactions at the monument and the popularity of his class indicates that the wounds from Vietnam are not healed — that "America's longest war" is not yet over.

The pilgrimage to the Wall actually began back in January when students enrolled in Dr. Capps' Religious Studies 155, "Religion and the Impact of Vietnam."

The most popular class at UCSB, the course carries with it a reputation of being one of the most unique courses taught at the university.

"I've never had a class like this and I don't think I ever will (again)," says UCSB senior Melissa Osaki.

The impressive list of guest speakers and the annual trip to Washington, D.C. have brought the class national publicity. In 1985, during the 10-year anniversary of the end of the war, reporters and television cameras were present for nearly every class session.

This quarter, CBS News' "60 Minutes" is featuring the class and the trip to Washington in an upcoming segment.

Due to the popularity of the class, admission tickets had to be issued at one point to enrolled students, because so many others were sitting in to listen.

"It's a circus," comments one student.

Although it is sometimes criticized in academic circles for being too "flashy," students are continually attracted to the class and praise it as "an unforgettable experience."

Guest speakers have included: former Secretary of the Securities and Exchange Commission John Wheeler, a Harvard graduate and Vietnam veteran who recently resigned his government post to devote full time to the Center for the Study of the Vietnam Generation; UC President David Gardner; "60 Minutes" anchorperson Ed Bradley; and Robert Kerrey, who is taking a break from his political career to co-teach the course this

quarter. While students enjoy the big-name lecturers, they say the most powerful part of the class comes from a series of testimonials by Vietnam veterans. Different veterans address the class approximately once a week, vividly describing their war experiences, which students say they will never forget.

"I just sit there and think, 'I could never live through that,'" says UCSB senior Kim Meyers.

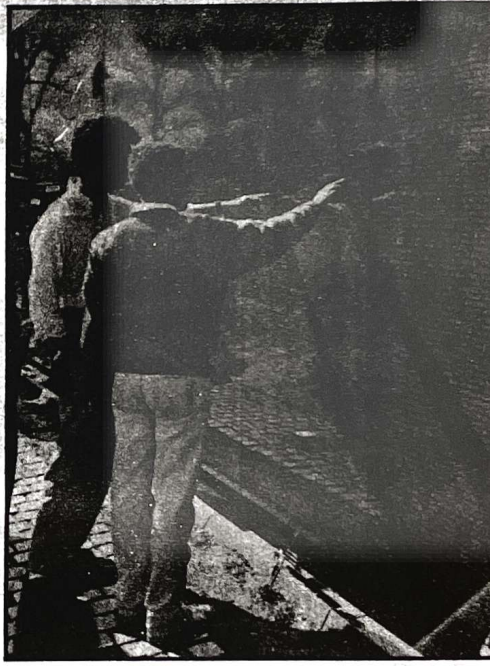
"They're not professors, they're not professionals. They're just vulnerable people standing up there telling their story," explains teaching assistant Erlene Goodell.

The "eyewitness" style of teaching shows students "this stuff is not pretend," she says.

Talking about their experiences (many for the first time), the veterans often benefit from the class by going through a kind of catharsis. But their intensely personal testimonials also bring about an empathetic reaction from the students.

"This class has been emotionally draining on me," says UCSB senior Kim Alexander. "It's caused me a lot of stress.... I think about it constantly."

Other students agree that the class and the issue of the war preoccupies much of their time. Many of the students are in tears every week. "I have another class right after this one and



Touching the Wall — Above, UCSB students Rich Slinn (left) and Mark Macarrow examine the engraved names on the Wall. At right, Vietnam veteran Jim Garrett receives a hug after the ceremony.



sometimes it's so hard to go," Meyers says.

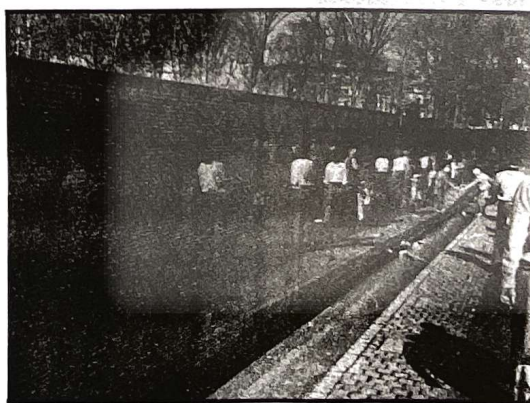
Goodell says her office hours are sometimes more like counseling sessions.

"I do a lot of active listening," she says. Students in the class often identify with the feelings and emotions expressed by the veterans, and it causes a self-evaluation.

"There is often some impact on the students' personal lives. What is happening on the stage taps into their emotions," Goodell explains.

Capps acknowledges that his course has a strong impact on students.

"I think it pushes knowledge to a personal depth that isn't often reached in an academic setting. But I've come to the conclusion that to get a point across, you have to paint a picture. Students can understand it better when they can

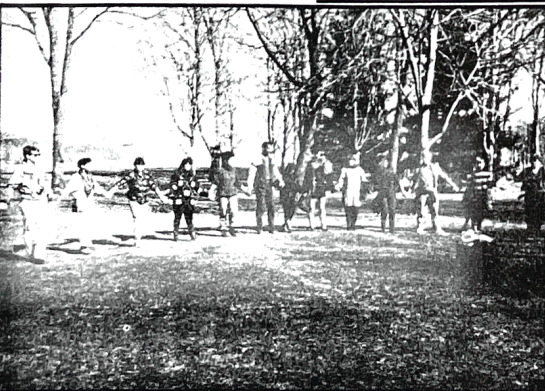


Mirror Effect — Visitors to the Wall can see their own reflections in the marble, symbolizing that they are "still part of the picture."

OF THE VIETNAM GENERATION



Photographs by Eddie Sanders



A Circle of Support — About 50 students hold hands next to the Wall for moment of silent prayer.

see it.

"This class isn't about the war, it's a response to the war. And it's a response that students can participate in," he explains.

Students say the class is not only a lesson about war, but a lesson about life. "I know this sounds corny, but I've really grown in this class," senior Steve Vincent explains.

According to Capps, "students learn about themselves in the class. The course is not set up to do that, but it does."

Sudden Enrollment Increases

In 1984, enrollment for the class began to shoot up. Since it was created in 1979, the class size has doubled each year, until it reached its present maximum capacity.

The recent media attention and 10-year anniversary of the fall of Saigon are undoubtedly responsible for much of younger people's interest in Vietnam.

Movies ranging from *Rambo* to *Platoon* have sparked a renewed interest in the Vietnam war, and for many college students, this represents their first exposure to the infrequently discussed war.

But Capps and students say the class's popularity is more than just a fad. Though the war officially ended in 1975, they say the fighting is not over yet, and it is up to their generation to resolve the issue.

"The people that went to the war are still in our society. They are still shaping our world.... It's not over," Alexander says, pointing out the estimated 100,000 suicides by Vietnam veterans since the end of the war. "People are still dying."

"It isn't over yet. The history of the war still has to be written. And it's my generation that will write that history," she adds.



Emotional Ceremony — Dr. Walter Capps (top center) speaks to students about the purpose of their trip. Above, UCSB student Kelly Murphy and "60 Minutes" anchorperson Ed Bradley do a "rubbing" of her father's name on the Wall. "60 Minutes" filmed the trip for an upcoming segment on the class.

Another reason for the popularity of the course is the lack of information students have received concerning the war. "America just wanted to forget about the war when we were young," Meyers explains.

Met with relative silence from an older generation that did not want to talk about the war, students today are eager to learn the facts and angry that their education failed to properly inform them.

"They're sort of startled at first," Goodell explains. "This generation only caught a hint of what went on. And now they want the facts. Many of them are rediscovering that era. I think it brings out that it isn't finished yet. Society isn't finished dealing with the war."

She is pleased this "rediscovery" includes many aspects of the war that had been

previously neglected. Students' research papers this quarter include topics such as the war's impact on the Vietnamese people and culture, the role of women and minorities in the war, and the healing process for the future.

Students Remember Little About War

As the children of the Vietnam generation, these students themselves remember little about the war.

When the first American serviceman was killed by North Vietnamese troops in 1959, Osaki was not even born. One of her first memories concerning Vietnam was of the controversy over the refugees.

"I asked my Mom why I didn't remember anything. She said we just didn't watch anything about it on TV. She wasn't into that kind of stuff ... so I never learned anything about it," she says.

After the Tet offensive of 1968, as Americans were learning that perhaps the war was a disastrous mistake, Vincent was learning to say the alphabet in kindergarten.

Vincent remembers seeing body counts on the news and the bombing of Cambodia, but his high school education about the war consisted of a short paragraph in a modern history book.

"So you've got people at college right now who are asking, 'What the hell went on?'" he says.

And senior Syndra Fretter was graduating from the fifth grade when the few remaining Americans were evacuated from Saigon in April 1975. Her only memory of the war was going with her father to the draft center where he received a deferral because he was a student and had a child.

She says the more she learns about the war, the more it disturbs her. "Now it makes me kind of angry because there wasn't much point to it. And it makes me scared because I see similar things happening right now in Central America."

Although Capps agrees that young people today were unfairly protected from hearing about the war by an older generation unable to agree on what happened, he still puts his faith in today's students to resolve the lingering problems about Vietnam.

Capps is hoping his course will help heal the wounds caused by the war. Because the younger generation is not as divided over the subject of Vietnam, he feels they will be the ones to "reconstruct" American society.

"Students don't carry the same conflict about the war," he says. "Now it's a reconstruction period and it's time to put the pieces back together. The intention of this course is healing."

Standing at the Wall in Washington, D.C., Osaki stares at her own reflection. In class, they had discussed this "mirror" effect, which symbolizes that "we are still part of the picture."

"We talked about it, but there's nothing like seeing it. You're part of it. Seeing myself with the names of those people, who were my age, written all over my face...." She stops, struggling to describe her feelings. "I don't know," she shakes her head. "It just gave me the chills. I don't think I'll ever be that sad again."

For students in the class, the trip to the Wall represents the culmination of 10 weeks at their own kind of "boot camp." After an emotional quarter listening to vets' stories and discovering the tragedy of Vietnam, the students are looking to the Wall to give them a sense of resolution.

"Taking this class is like going through the war. And coming to the Wall is like the beginning of the healing process," Alexander explains.

One Vietnam veteran in the group jokes that the students are also veterans — veterans of the class.

Capps, who has made the trip for three years in a row, believes the pilgrimage is necessary to comprehend the Vietnam experience.

"You can't understand the war without visiting the monument at some point," he says.

Though students tried to prepare themselves for the trip, they say they did not expect to feel as emotional as they did at the Wall.

"For the first time you see how much 58,000 is," Vincent says.

As students walk down the pathway next to the wall, they pass flowers, wreaths, flags and other mementos. Since it was dedicated in 1982, letters, dog tags, photos and combat boots have also been left at the foot of the Wall in memory of the Americans lost in the war.

John Wheeler, who helped organize the Wall's construction, estimates that more than 23 million people have visited the Wall. Everything left at the monument is collected and stored by historians, according to Wheeler.

The memorial is not for the soldiers of the war, he says, but for those they left behind.

Students React to The Wall

For senior Joe Mazzocco, it was the descent down the path to the apex of the Wall that struck him. The first few panels of the Wall are at foot level, but as it cuts into the earth, it creates a trench until the monument is several feet above the viewer's head.

"We started walking down and we couldn't say anything. It's like you enter another world," he says, describing how the street and surrounding buildings disappear from view. "You're isolated from everything else and that's all that there is."

"I don't think I've felt emotion like that before," Mazzocco says.

Students say they were confused and surprised by their own reactions. "There was no one there I was grieving for, and yet I felt so sad," Osaki says.

Senior Jennifer Karson was also impressed by the walk down to the center of the wall. "You sort of sink into a level where the names start to rise up to you. You're confronted with a whole wall of men's names. You're just confronted with it, and the reality hits you."

(See WALL, p.14)