The Moving Wall

Photographs by Michael Bettencourt

Here in Boston, July 4 always has the adjective "gala" grafted to it because of the city's tradition of celebrating it with a Boston Pops concert on the spacious Esplanade followed by a dynamite (no pun intended) fireworks display over the Charles River. Several hundred thousand people sardine themselves along the banks of the river and on its arching bridges to catch the foudroyant spectacle and listen to the cannonade rhythms of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." Like everyone else, I feel momentarily swaddled in camaraderie, thankful to be a citizen (in its meaning of "member of the city"), unalienated and dazzled.

However, no matter how innovative the pyrotechnicians, no matter how many fizgigs and whiz-bangs and tri-colored star clusters they lob upwards, the celebration can never match the July 4 I spent in Concord, NH, in 1990 covering the visit to the state of The Moving Wall, a mobile version of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. Throughout that day and throughout that night, and for several days before and after, in solemn parade or solitary vigil, thousands of people came to pay their respects. While the Boston skies rattled with drummed-up patriotism, the air in Concord shimmered with the hues of quiet pain and still-smoldering confusion. Here is an account of that time.

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Gary Gordon, former president of the Central New Hampshire Chapter 41 of Vietnam Veterans of America, took a deep sigh and slowly let it out, his face wreathed in a grey beard, on his head his ever-present baseball cap with the Vietnam Veterans patch sewn on it. "Getting the Moving Wall to New Hampshire was something that, if we'd known how hard it was going to be, we probably wouldn't have done it." He paused, then spoke again. "But it was good that we did it. The Wall did what we wanted it to do: educate people, open their eyes, get them to remember what things were like. It was definitely a successful venture."

Successful indeed. Thanks to John Devitt, the driving force behind turning the idea of The Moving Wall into a migratory reality, The Moving Wall, which came to the campus of the New Hampshire Technical Institute in Concord from June 30 to July 6, 1990, drew between 50,000 and 60,000 visitors - 6 percent of the state's population. Devitt began work on it in 1983 as a way for people on the west coast who couldn't get to Washington to see the national memorial.

Work on getting the Wall to New Hampshire began in July 1988 as a kind of off-hand suggestion by one of the vets in the chapter. Gordon and others began to track it down, and with the help of a local radio station employee, they finally contacted Devitt late in July. At their next meeting the chapter members considered the information Devitt sent Gordon, and while everyone signed on to the idea of sponsoring a visit to New Hampshire, they also needed about $6000 to pay for the Wall's transportation, Devitt's expenses and mileage, and security.

"We started a fundraising drive," Gordon recalled, "without knowing a thing about fundraising." The radio station began airing public service announcements as well as sending the PSAs to other major stations in the state. Gordon began doing interviews on radio talk shows, which so impressed the executive director of the New Hampshire Association of Broadcasters and the publisher of the Manchester Union Leader that they guaranteed to make up any difference Gordon needed to get the $6000. They would also provide free publicity (which eventually totaled about $30,000 in value).

Eventually, with cans distributed around the Concord area bringing in almost $4000 in pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and the occasional dollar bill, and other contributions, such as the $300 given by the president of the bank that set up the chapter's account, they raised the $6000. Gordon tells the story of how one woman, living on welfare, could only afford to send in a postage stamp but said that she wanted to be able to contribute something.

By sheer luck they were able to contract for the Wall to be in New Hampshire over the July 4 holiday. On June 29, 1990, the Wall arrived.

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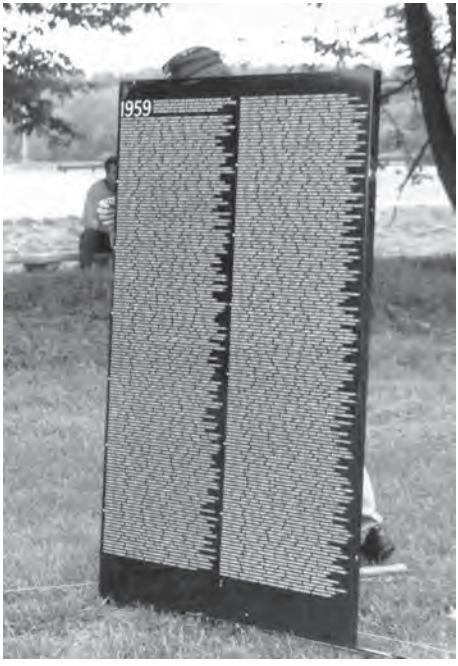
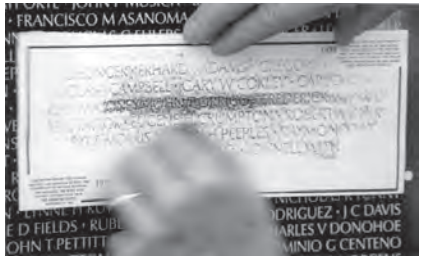
People have already begun to assemble, a day early, as the truck carrying the Wall pulls onto the grassy display area and the assembled vets from Chapter 41 greet its arrival. As the truck driver gets out of his cab, a thick braid of hair roped over his shoulder, "Vietnam Veteran of East Tennessee" embroidered across the brim of his hat, fellow


1959

vets embrace him. Panel after panel slides out of the wooden crates, gets set and bolted into place. The men laugh, sweat, banter, curse: they easily orbit each other, all differences and wounds for the moment set aside. Camaraderie of memory, companionship of pain.



Even before the two long wings spread their long muster, people drift up to see, to discover, to ease into. The journalists arrive to make their records. Volunteers with directories circulate location numbers, and people start taking their stencils. Bit by bit, like some one-part-in-a-billion scent, the Wall marks the air. People's lungs fill with it, and they must come to this spot to breathe.

The next day, the official day of arrivals, formal ceremonies begin at 10 a.m. with the usual gaggle of politicians; the Gold Star mothers in the front row; the presentation of the colors - all the correct protocol. But at 6 PM, away from the official rostrum and assembled folding chairs, embraced by the black arms of the Wall, a voice begins reading the names of the New Hampshire dead, 226 of them, and the real opening begins.

Laid out on the ground in front of the microphone is a grid of string; at each corner of each square a volunteer will plant a flag for each name. In the middle of the square is a rifle stuck barrel-first in the ground; a flak jacket hangs from the rifle, a pair of boots at its hem, a helmet balanced on the stock. As the voice goes through the letters - Abbott, Terry Michael; Guild, Eliot Franklin - people

hang their heads or turn away or wait with old pain on their faces. Kilton, Stanley Roy Jr.; Perrault, David B. - the steady stream of people carrying the flags, then putting them into the ground, then marching away to get another flag, matches the elegiac rhythms of the unfurling syllables. Towle, Gary Chester; Wiley, Alden Bertram - everyone breathes slowly and carefully on this hallowed ground.

Then one vet walks up to the microphone, holds a cassette player up to it, and turns it on. The lone keen of Taps spans the dusk. Hands snap to brows in salutes; hands cup hearts; time stops. Each note edges the twilight air with its brass sadness, and for the duration of the music everyone is in community, their

private losses linked and shared. It is a moment of grief and promise, void and redemption. “Thank you, New Hampshire,” a voice shouts into the microphone. At night, candles will burn between the rows of flags, their flames dancing the stripes and stars against the darkness.

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After a while the pointing, the etching, the amended explanations for children become the ordinary folkways of this bounded geography, with stories full of acid and irony - and accidental joy. David Moorhead, at Tet. Landed in January. Shot in February, eight bullets, burned with phosphorous. All this explained by his wife as he stares at a panel of names. He speaks. “I don’t remember anything. I was looking for names, to jog my memory.” He pauses. “When I got back, people would throw shit on me, call me names. I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t do anything wrong!” His wife walks away a step, then turns back. “I didn’t kill any babies. I wish I could remember.”

Yet two men looking for each other’s name literally bump into one another as they traverse the panels, unaware that the other was alive and in New Hampshire. Men who had been only voices on the radio to platoon commanders suddenly take shape and heft. Two men serving on the same battleship no more than a hundred feet from each other take twenty years to learn they live just a town apart.

What brought you here? “I lost my fiancé.... We didn’t have the catharsis of victory; it was a different war.” What brought you here? “My heart.” What brought you here? “To remember.” What brought you here tonight? “I am looking for a friend of my parents.... I am sick to my stomach.” What brought you here? “I don’t know why I’m here and they’re not. A matter of luck, a game of

inches." A little girl, pointing to her brother rolling around in the grass, shouts to her father, "He said that all those flags will turn into flowers." He laughs loudly.

At night dew settles on the aluminum panels in a grey sheen, and here and there it's wiped away by a handprint, stark black against the mist - a second record of touch and touched. The people at midnight number a dozen, maybe two, sometimes in pairs, often alone. What brings you here tonight? "During the day it's for a lot of people, bringing their kids, talking, looking on. But at night it's really a memorial. You can come here and pay your respects, be private with your grief." What brings you here tonight? "After 23 years, someone finally said "Welcome home.'" What brings you here tonight? "I don't want to see any more memorials."

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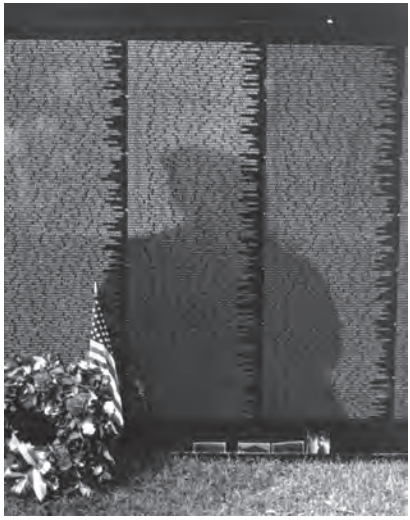

Two AM: the air lapped with dew, the moon long descended; only a few stars litter the sky. July 4th. I sit with three men under a large green Army tent; a fourth dozes on a cot in the corner. We speak of nothing in particular, the mosquitoes and hot coffee cups in our hands keeping us in a semblance of awake. Outside the thrown ambit of yellow light another tent humps against the darkness, where other men rest or sit alone, their thin silhouettes etched against the residual light. They are all keeping a vigil, they have all been keeping a vigil for five days now, keeping a watch over the Wall.

A single man stands in the soft glow of the floodlights. Time has moved to 2:15. Dressed in fatigues and combat boots, bare headed, he moves slowly along the black plane ghosted with a frost of names. Candles set along the base of the Wall earlier in the evening gutter; their chancy flicker falls on bouquets, photographs, hand-scrawled notes, poems, wreaths. He ghosts in and out of the islands of light, the number of names he passes increasing with each step. At the mid-point, where 1959 meets 1975, he stops. His hand reaches out, brushes against a name, tracing its length one way, back the other. He stiffens his body tall and his right hand leaps up in a salute. He snaps the salute with a brisk, almost savage, grace, then turns and walks away into the darkness.

The man next to me doesn't say anything, just looks down into his coffee and stares.

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The final ceremonies. All day people have been reading the names of the MIA's, an eight-hour roll call. Finally, the last name from Wyoming is read; the sun rips the day's blue into dusk. Long, thin, white candles appear in people's hands, and these exclamations of light punctuate the coming darkness. A few more speeches, the names of New Hampshire's MIA's, a song from a vet, and finally Taps one last time. The filled air thrums and embraces.

Then all the members of Chapter 41 gather together, and, shielding their candles, the dozen and a half of them march to the point where 1959 meets 1975. Holding the candles aloft they shout on a count of three, "Welcome home." Then they embrace in the way men do, with large slaps on the back and a quick, tourniquet squeeze of the arms. The people around them, still holding candles, laugh and embrace, and from somewhere begins applause that ripples like wind through ripe wheat. The Wall is open all night again, and still the people come.

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Seven AM: the truck is pulled up and the panels get re-slotted in their crates, then the track and spikes. Several do a final garbage check. Then a quick goodbye to the driver and the truck pulls away. The men look at one another, shake hands, go to their cars and vans and motorcycles. The day promises abundant sunshine.

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It's difficult to describe in words what the Wall meant, what it did to and for people, but here's one fact that at least indicates the Wall's power: People left behind over 800 artifacts - letters, shirts, pictures, flags, medals - enough to cover twenty-six 8-foot long cafeteria tables. In the end, the Wall is nothing more and nothing less than an epic narrative of agony and remorse, failure and guilt, but also of incredible courage and tenderness displayed in a time and place that guaranteed to kill off decency. And each person who witnesses the Wall, whose face is reflected back from its black enameled panels ghosted with names, extends the narrative and keeps it alive so that we can never forget and never again have cause to build another war memorial.

The Wall is now gone. Gordon says the chapter will take a break before tackling anything else, but its next big project will be to put its scholarship program on a solid financial footing. He also says there's talk about bringing the Wall back, but for now he's content that people have seen it and have had their memories refreshed. "The learning was there," he says with a smile, "especially for the children."


IN
REMEMBRANCE
WE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS PLACE
THESE WHITE FLOWERS AS A SYMBOL OF
PURITY AT THIS SYMBOLIC SITE-
THAT MAY EACH FUTURE GENERATION
EMULATE THEIR UNSELFISH DEVOTION TO
DUTY. EVEN TO THE LAST OF OUR
COMRADES.


THOMAS T BROWN · DAVID L SCOTT
NARVIN O WITTMAN
BOBBY RAY GARDNER
JOHN R FEELING
TERRANCE L LEACH
JESUS VASQUEZ
JOSEPH V CRUZ
DOUGLAS D COFFMAN
JOHN W H PATTERSON
DANNY LEE INGLES
CARY B STEPHENS
FRANK M BOZZELLO
ERSKIN D LIVINGSTON


VIETNAM VETERAN
AND DAMN PROUD OF IT


VETERANS FOR
PEACE


YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

Afterthoughts

What are we to make of Vietnam, ended now for two decades? Many vets still see it as the pivotal (and some the most damnable) moment of their lives, while other vets have found a place for it and gone on. Some people want to make sure that it persists in our national memory as an inoculation against ever again invading another country, while others see the "Vietnam syndrome" as a shorthand for a national and moral weakness that hinders a realistic foreign policy. Movie after movie has glorified the "grunts" and attempted to win the war for them, but none, except perhaps Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket,* has examined the validity or coherence of the attitudes and policies that mired those grunts in Vietnam.

In these and a thousand other ways, Vietnam haunts us - but why? What is it about this war that will not leave us alone? Even though it was billed as a war to stop communism, Vietnam eventually became another American civil war, and the dread and havoc generated by our first civil war came virulently back to life during our second. Reaction to the war revealed the fault lines in a society that declared itself democratic and free but where elected leaders lied, corporations gouged, equality and justice got betrayed daily, and poverty gave the lie to economic opportunity. Under the enzymatic pressure of the war, we had to face and judge the quality and completeness of our commitment to democracy, and that effort splintered us because it showed how much we didn't have in common.

That fractured portrait of a nation at odds with its own ideals still haunts us because we're still at those same odds even after twenty years of counting the dead and recounting why things didn't work. "Vietnam" is cognate with loss, of human lives, of ideals, of chances, of purpose, and the roster of 50,000 names is the indissoluble reminder of those losses.

And yet...there comes a time to either let the wound resolve into poison or make the effort to heal. Each of the names on the wall, and the names of the Vietnamese and Cambodians and Laotians we'll never know, is a call to do what we need to do to make good on the promises we've made to ourselves about freedom and prosperity, about justice and happiness. If we don't do that work of political redemption, if we don't make the words these people died for flesh on the bones of each citizen, then the word "Vietnam" will always remind us of what we are not now.

The lesson of Vietnam is that we need finally to become the United States, not a landscape of corporations and political shills, but a country that makes freedom and justice common miracles.

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Excerpts from people's comments and artifacts left at the Wall

"He was like a son to me. We would sit in the car and talk. He came home once and he was safe. But he went back and he was killed on his 21st birthday."

"I'm doing okay at not doing okay."

"And ya know the sad thing - we didn't get nothin' out of it."

"Flower petals scattered to the winds."

"Shine on, you crazy diamond....Come on you rover, you seer of visions, come on you painter, you piper, you prisoner, and shine!"

"...a time for remembering the names in the light."

"In the silence of the Wall I have felt healing in the remembrance."

"So your names may be carved on this wall, but you will be permanently carved in our hearts and minds."

About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also looks to collaborate with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director) - Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer) - Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at www.m-bettencourt.com

Block & Tackle PRODUCTIONS

www.blockandtackleproductions.com