

This Day in History... November 13, 1982

Dedication of Vietnam Veterans Memorial

On November 13, 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was officially dedicated in Washington, DC.

In the 1950s, Vietnam was divided along the 17th parallel, into communist North and anti-communist South Vietnam. Following the assassination of the despotic president of South Vietnam, a period of political instability began while military generals fought for control of the government.

The number of American advisors in Vietnam grew, and by the end of 1963, there were 16,000 US military personnel in Vietnam. That number increased significantly after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave President Johnson the power to increase the country's involvement in Vietnam without declaring war.

By the end of 1966, there were 400,000 Americans fighting in Vietnam. Peace talks began in 1968, but were repeatedly stalled. After Richard Nixon took office as US president in 1969, he began Vietnamization, to remove American troops and leave the fighting to the South Vietnamese. The last Americans left Vietnam in 1973, and the war continued until the fall of Saigon two years later. Vietnam was reunited as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976.



From the 1960s Celebrate the Century sheet

Three years later, back in America, Vietnam veterans grew frustrated with the “invisibility” imposed on them by Americans due to public discontent with the war. In 1979, they formed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) to publicly acknowledge those who died or are listed as missing in action in the Vietnam War. Over time they raised \$8.4 million for the memorial. In 1980, they selected a site near the Lincoln Memorial and received permission from Congress to demolish an old World War I Munitions Building.

The design of the memorial was open to competition. Some 1,421 designs were submitted and then reviewed by a selection committee. Yale undergraduate Maya Lin won the competition. The Ohio-born student's design featured an over 493-footlong V-shaped reflective black granite wall. Its two ends point to the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument. At first, many opposed the design because it was unconventional, black, and lacked ornamentation, calling it a “black gash of shame.” Eventually, they reached a compromise, agreeing to add a bronze statue of American soldiers on one side.

Construction on the memorial began on March 26, 1982. The stone for the memorial came from India and was specifically selected for its highly reflective surface. The stone cutting was done in Vermont and the 57,939 names were etched in Tennessee. They used a sandblasting process to etch the names on the stone.



About 1,200 of the names on the wall are listed as POW/MIA.

Construction on the wall was completed in late October and preparations immediately began for a dedication ceremony. The dedication of the wall was preceded by a week-long salute to Vietnam veterans. Then on November 13, 1982, thousands of Vietnam veterans took part in a march through Washington to attend the dedication ceremony.

At the wall, a sound system played the dramatic theme from *Chariots of Fire*. The ceremony, attended by some 150,000 people, was broadcast live over the radio. There was a presentation of the state and territorial flags and a series of speeches. One veteran declared, “I, like many others, found that being known as a Vietnam veteran was a very dubious distinction. But today this situation has changed.” Another speaker proclaimed, “This Memorial symbolizes not only the supreme gift of nearly 58,000 young Americans but also the priceless gift of renewed awareness in our capacity as a people.”

Two years after this ceremony, the sculpture, *The Three Soldiers* or *The Three Servicemen*, was unveiled at the memorial. It depicts a Marine and two Army soldiers of different races. In 1993, another statue was added – the Vietnam Women's Memorial. It depicts uniformed women, who mostly served as nurses, aiding a wounded soldier. Finally, in 2004, a memorial plaque was added “In memory of the men and women who served in the Vietnam War and later died as a result of their service. We honor and remember their sacrifice.”

Presently, the names of more than 58,000 men and women listed as missing or killed in the Vietnam War are etched into the wall. The memorial, maintained by the National Park Service, hosts over 3 million visitors each year and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



This stamp was issued two years after the memorial's dedication.



Issued on Veterans Day in 1979 and pictures the ribbon of the Vietnam Service Medal.



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