

By Stephen Rusiniak

He was as close to the wall as his wheelchair would permit. Leaning forward, he reached out until his feeble fingers were able to touch the shiny-black granite. And as he did he began to softly sob. I tried to look away—conscious of the fact that my staring might cause him embarrassment, but I just couldn't. I was somehow drawn into depths of this old man's profound sadness as he gently caressed the name etched into this memorial wall.

Totally lost in the moment, I failed to notice when he caught me staring. "He's my son, a helicopter gunner...shot down...lost, back in '65." He dabbed away the tears running down his cheeks with his coat sleeve and again whispered, "My son."

Turning back towards the wall he brought his fingers to his lips and then back to the stone bearing his hero-son's name. I froze, lost in the moment; so moved by a father's undying love for a son long gone; his emotions, his grief, undiminished after so many years, decades.

Quite unexpectedly, I felt tears of my own, and so I turned away, slightly embarrassed, for just a moment, when suddenly I felt this need to speak with him; to thank him—for his son's sacrifice and his own, but when I turned to do so, he was gone, lost among the crowds of people, who like me, had come to view the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

Before I left the grounds on that beautiful spring morning I offered a silent prayer for both the father and the son and for their individual sacrifices. And then, as I looked across the expanse of the wall itself, I offered another—this one a prayer of gratitude, for sacrifices suffered by the other 58,260 brave men and women whose names are forever memorialized along with that of a young helicopter gunner.

Too many have forgotten the true meaning of Memorial Day, and that's a shame. Too many associate the last Monday in May as simply the unofficial start of another summer season and a day dedicated to picnics and barbecues, parades and pool openings, department store sales and a three-day weekend.

To all those men and women who gave their lives in the service of this great country, may they rest in peace...and thank you.

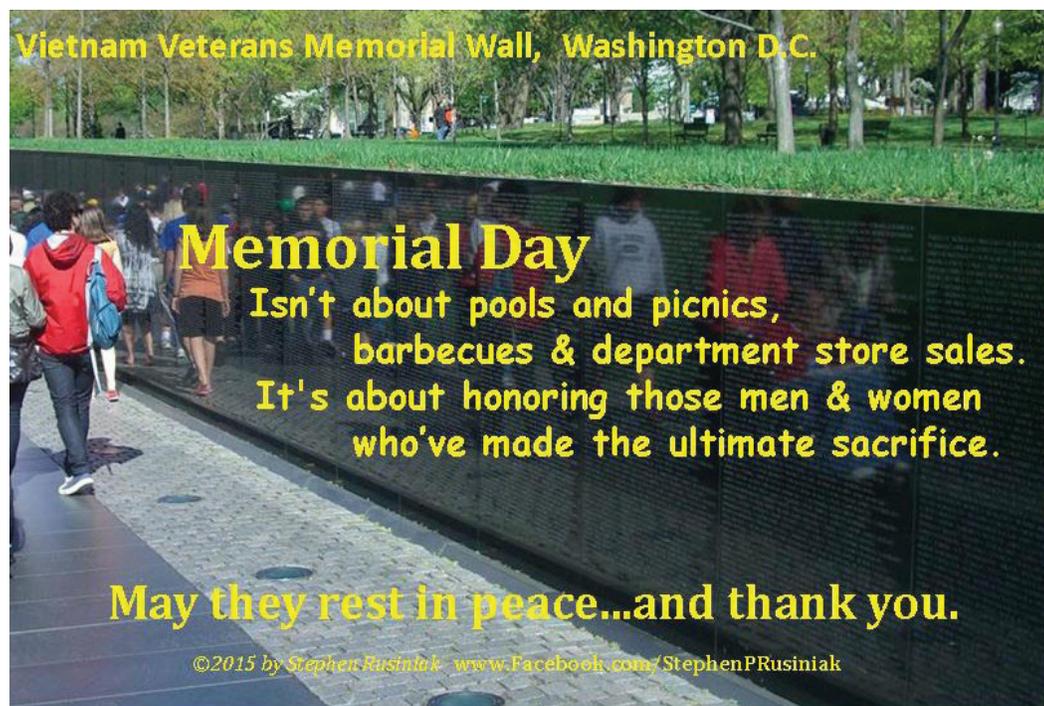
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the backstory:

On a beautiful spring morning, not so long ago, I had the privilege of visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall while on a weekend Boy Scout tour of Washington D.C. As always, the Scouts were laughing and talking and simply enjoying our trip that April morning, but as they approached the memorial—sudden silence; for those paying their respects, and for those whose names were forever etched into the shiny black granite.

I walked ahead of the Scouts in order to take a photo of the memorial—which I did, but while doing so I noticed an elderly man in a wheelchair. I watched him for just a moment or two, and what happened next became the Op-Ed: ***A father's undying love.***

Since its original publication, this piece has appeared annually around Memorial Day in newspapers and online—sometimes with the same title, and sometimes as ***A son's sacrifice, a fathers grief.*** No matter the title, my intended message remains the same.



My original photo and reworked verbiage for sharing the message on Twitter