

## A WAR STORY

### The Wall

by James Blake,  
Cam Ranh Bay AB 1971

## Rainy Day at The Wall

by James Blake

The rain was coming down in a hard drizzle as I approached the area where I had been told that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial ("The Wall") was. It was close to 10 p.m. by the time I reached the area of the mall that I had been directed to. What struck me first was how dark it was, and the fact that there was no flag or flagpole nearby. As I approached the memorial, a vet in cammies (camouflage fatigues) came up to me and told me to "watch my step." It became evident why he had told me this when I discovered that there was no walkway, other than a muddy track, upon which someone had put some boards and you had to walk on the boards to keep from falling into the mud. Except for the portable Coleman type lamps at either end of The Wall, there were no lights to illuminate either the walkway or The Wall itself.

Although there wasn't much to see in the darkness, I did experience some profound emotions as I walked down the path to the center of The Wall, and then walked back up in again to the other end. I felt as though I was walking into the pits of hell as I walked down the path that led to where The Wall was highest, where the two ends converged. A sudden chill came over me, I started shaking and then I started to cry. I don't know why, but the crying seemed to take over my body and I couldn't stop. It felt as though I was going under water and the waves were crashing over me and the water was pulling me out into the dark, deep sea. It was total sensory overload and it was not something I was Prepared for or ready to deal with, it was just too overwhelming and I had nothing to compare it to. These conflicting feelings and emotions included what I later found to be something called, "survivor guilt". Seeing, or since it was so dark, *feeling* all those names on The Wall, just overwhelmed me with this sense of *why I survived* Vietnam when all of these other guys (and girls, eight of whom are on The Wall) died. Why did I come home when all of these others didn't? Why was I so special that I lived and they died? For the first time in my life, since returning from Vietnam, I was starting to deal with some of the things that I had locked away in some secure place in my mind. And it scared me! So, alone with the guilt and the grief I now added fear to what I was feeling. And the fear was an enveloping type of fear. It just swallowed me up, so that there was nothing of me left and I felt lost and alone and unsure of what was happening.

Walking back up the boards on the other side of The Wall, I was just totally overcome by all of these feelings, and felt myself stepping up my pace, as though, by getting away from The Wall, I could get away from all the feelings. As I approached the furthest end of The Wall, one of the vets in cammies came up to me and just grabbed me in a bear hug. He could tell, without my saying anything, that I was a Vietnam vet. He could tell, without my saying anything, that I was overcome by it all. So he did the best he could and just hugged me, telling me that it was OK and that I should come back in the daytime and that it was a beautiful thing to see. He also told me something that almost struck me funny he said, "Man you don't have to say anything, it's OK." Hell, even if I had wanted to say something, I couldn't have, I was too busy crying like a baby, with all of these feelings bubbling over and bursting out of the door that I had double-locked them behind in my mind. It seemed like he held me in that bear hug for an hour, but it was probably only for a few seconds. As I walked away from him, I did feel somewhat better.

Two hours later I found myself walking around downtown Washington, D.C.. I had no idea that two hours had gone by--it was as though I was on automatic pilot and had shut my mind down for that period of time. Perhaps the whole experience of seeing The Wall for the first time, and alone, had been too much for me to deal with and my mind realized that and just went off on its own for some well-deserved R & R.

*Since that day in January 1983, I have been back to The Wall five times. Each visit has given me a new insight and has helped tremendously in the healing process. Someday, Vietnam really will be over, for me and every other vet that was there.*

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