

Bay Runner
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Moving Wall a Moving Experience *By Sue Mayfield-Geiger*



It was rainy. It was emotional. It was a dreary day with gray clouds.

Galveston Bay was the perfect backdrop as the helicopter landed on the shores of Sylvan Beach, the first of two trips, bringing in some very special passengers. The first four emerged to a crowd of applause, roaring cheers, flag waving; then hugging, tears and 40 years worth of pent up feelings.

“We Were Soldiers Once and Young,” told their story in a movie (2002) featuring Mel Gibson (based on the book by Lt. Gen. Hal Moore and Joe Galloway) about the gruesome 1965 battle in Ia Drang, Vietnam. And here they were, the actual combatants and survivors being honored and revered. The shouts of “welcome home” were music to their ears. One of them carried their unit’s flag and held it high throughout the ceremony. They were introduced one by one and gave short, yet moving speeches of thanks.

In November 1965, 450 U.S. Army soldiers of the 1st Calvary were dropped into a small clearing in the Ia Drang Valley where they were surrounded by 2,000 North Vietnamese soldiers. 234 died during the four-day battle. That is more Americans than were killed in any regiment, north or south, at the Battle of Gettysburg, and far more than were killed in

combat in the entire Persian Gulf War. Seventy more died in the Ia Drang in desperate skirmishes before and after the big battles at X-Ray and Albany.

The majority of the soldiers were draftees, 19- and 20-years-old, mostly Private First Class, who received a salary of \$99.37 a month.

All of the names are engraved on the third panel to the right of the apex, Panel 3-East, of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., as well as The Moving Wall, a half-size replica of the D.C. Memorial that has been touring the country for almost twenty years. The brainchild of John Devitt, John attended the 1982 dedication of the actual wall in Washington, and vowed to share that experience with those who did not have the opportunity to go to Washington. So together with Norris Shears, Gerry Haver, and other Vietnam veteran volunteers, they built The Moving Wall. It went on display for the first time in Tyler, Texas in October of 1984. Two structures of The Moving Wall now travel the USA from April through November, spending about a week at each site.

Last month, The Moving Wall was at Sylvan Beach in LaPorte for seven days. It was a time of reflection, patriotism, brotherhood and reconnecting.

As visitors walked the boardwalk and silently read the names, some recognized relatives and loved ones. Roses were offered, some photos, but mostly those who came were there to pay their respects. Some touched the names, others took paper and pencil to retrieve a copy of the engraving. The highlight of that rainy November day, however, was when the helicopter approached and brought some of our own home again. They are:

- Vince Cantu
- Jay Denton
- Clarence Davis
- Nathan Harvey
- Martin Latigue
- Joe Rivera
- Joe Pena
- Robert Sancedo
- Bonifacio Juarez (arrived later in the day)

Also among them was Ed Acuna, a former helicopter pilot who was in the Ia Drang area during the same battle. They are from the 1st Calvary Division, Airmobile Unit, all in their early sixties now. Wayne Sabo, LaPorte City Planner, opened the ceremony by telling them we ordered the weather to make them feel at home. Then he recollected his own military experience and how all the soldiers from the Vietnam era served when they were called, and how each and every one of the survivors fought hard to save their buddies, especially those 58,000 plus names on the wall. Sabo reminded us that in today's troubled times, we must remember that our duty as a nation is to "fight, win and come home."

Jim Hodges of the 25th Infantry and now a member of America's Last Patrol Ranch, Post #2, introduced the honorees, as well as two of the widows whose husbands' names are on the wall: Gloria Martinez, widow of Luis A. Martinez; and Gloria Pena, widow of Henry R. Garcia.

As the survivors concluded their testimonies, all agreed that it was wonderful to "finally have the support we needed all along."

After the ceremony, the wall visitation resumed. Dick Ford of LaPorte came to remember his buddy, Michael L. Horn, a marine whose name appears in section 63W of the wall. Dan Hickey, former PBR captain, said about ten of his buddies were on the wall. Wives, mothers, children and friends all knew someone among the 58,228 names, eight of whom are women.

With the breeze blowing, the sight of the U.S. flag, the Texas flag and the POW/MIA flag in back of the wall were powerful statements of unification.

The day following the ceremony of the Ia Drang survivors, Hodges lead a moving POW/MIA presentation. A color guard approached as taps was played. A lone table (known as the "Missing Man" table) was the focal point, honoring the POWs and MIAs. Adorned with a white tablecloth representing purity of intentions to respond to a call to arms, empty places represent those missing from each of the five branches of service—Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard. The table also held: A slice of lemon to remind us of the bitter fate of those captured and missing, a salt shaker portraying tears endured, a rose symbolizing family and loved ones who are keeping the faith, an inverted cup meaning the POWs and MIAs could not toast us, and the absence of chairs because they are not here.

The Moving Wall in LaPorte was made possible by many volunteers, specifically, America's Last Patrol Ranch Post #2, Poly One, Nations Rent, Dupont, Zachery, Rohm & Haas, Deer Park Lumber, Home Depot, Design Ventures, McJunkin and International Tools & Sales.

After leaving LaPorte, The Moving Wall was shipped back to California for the winter. It will resume traveling again in the spring. For more information, visit www.themovingwall.org.

"IN HONOR OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMED FORCES OF THE UNITED STATES WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR. THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE WHO REMAIN MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US."

Preamble of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial