

What becomes of the tokens left behind at the Vietnam memorial?

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These flowers, notes and memento cards were left at the Wall on Memorial Day, 2011. Photo: Chris Kleponis/AFP/Getty Images.

Each year, more than 4 million people visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The Vietnam War began in 1954. For Americans, it lasted until 1973, when the U.S. left Vietnam.

More than 2 million people worldwide died in this war. About 58,000 American men and women died or went missing during the conflict. Their names appear on the memorial's black granite walls. Many visitors leave items related to the memories of lost friends and family.



Every night, employees of the National Park Service, called NPS for short, collect these items. They end up at the Museum Resource Center, or MRC. This building, as large as two football fields, is located in Maryland. Janet Donlin is a museum technician who processes the items. There are around 400,000 items and counting. Some are as small as a pin, while others are as large as a motorcycle. The objects are neatly stored in blue boxes or on shelves. They are organized by the date they were left at the memorial, which is often called the Wall.

Letters, Photos And Memorabilia

Letters, photos and memorabilia make up most of the collection. Some people plan in advance what items they will leave. Others decide to leave something at the last minute. They drop off notes scribbled on hotel stationery or objects from their pockets.

The museum collection serves two purposes, according to Donlin. The first is to help Vietnam veterans heal their emotional wounds from the war. The second is to serve as a way for family and friends to remember their loved ones.

Donlin says that veterans often write letters to express their feelings of loss and grief. The collection includes a former soldier's letter to his friend who died in the war. The soldier wrote that he felt responsible for the friend's death. He asked for the friend's forgiveness.

The collection also contains many items that honor the fallen. Bruce P. Crandall received the Medal of Honor for bravery during his time in Vietnam. The Medal of Honor is the highest possible military award. It recognizes heroic acts in combat. Crandall chose to leave his Medal of Honor at the Wall.

Leaving Objects Behind Was Unexpected

Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran, came up with the idea for the memorial in 1979. He envisioned having soldiers' names inscribed on a monument. Two years later, a student named Maya Lin won a public competition for the memorial's design. Lin was studying at Yale University at the time. She was just 21 years old. Construction of the Wall began in 1982.



At first, the leaving of objects surprised the NPS staff. They put them aside thinking people would come back to collect them. As months passed, it became clear that the items had been left intentionally. Park service officials perceived that these items had deeply personal value. They decided to place them in a permanent collection.

“We do face a lot of challenges with this collection,” says Donlin. One problem is the physical condition of items, some of which are damaged by weather. The staff also aims to protect the privacy of those who leave items. Donlin feels this is especially important. “There are so many deeply personal stories being told,” she says.

Interpreting The Significance Of The Items

Another challenge is interpreting the collection. “Every object left at the Wall tells a story,” Donlin says.

Learning the importance of items can be difficult. Donlin says she often does research to understand their meaning. Since many of the items are military-related, she uses reference books to identify badges, medals and military gear.

Donlin also investigates names related to personal artifacts. Sometimes visitors leave letters that are addressed only to a first name. In those cases, she may be able to identify the person it was left for depending on where it was left by the Wall. If a photograph bears a last name, she can often figure out who the person in the photo is.

The MRC is not open to the public. However, some of its artifacts will be displayed at a planned Vietnam War education center. Meanwhile, the collection continues to grow and change as visitors add to it.