

Offering at the Wall

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Near the base of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, comrades and loved ones leave their poignant tokens of remembrance

"In the fall of 1982, a U.S. Navy officer walked up to the trench where the concrete for the foundation of The Wall was being poured. He stood over the trench for a moment, then tossed something into it and saluted. A workman asked him what he was doing. He said he was giving his dead brother's Purple Heart to The Wall. That was the first offering."

The story is told in a new book about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, *Offerings at The Wall*, released this month by Turner Publishing Inc. The photographs in the book record some of the 30,000 objects and letters that have been placed at The Wall, as if at a shrine, by relatives and comrades of the men and women there memorialized.

These gifts of remembrance are collected each day by volunteers and preserved by the National Park Service in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection, housed in a climate-controlled repository where the mementos lie near such historic artifacts as the life mask of Abraham Lincoln. (Five hundred of the objects are on view in an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.)

Some of the offerings were left with poems or letters (letters that were sealed will always remain so), but others bear meanings known only to those who offered them: a Bible, a fishing float, service ribbons, a sock for an amputee's stump, a popsicle stick, four mortar-board tassels, a foil wrapper from a Hershey's Kiss. In his eloquent introduction to the book, Thomas B. Allen writes that The Wall "became a place for wishes, for futures that could not be. Tucked into a wreath are the things of an imagined life: new baby shoes for a baby who never would be, the pencils and crayons for a first day of kindergarten that never would be, champagne glasses to toast a wedding anniversary that never would be, ornaments for a Christmas tree that never would be." Someone left five cards, a royal flush for a poker game that never would be played. And a soldier left a photograph of a North Vietnamese man with a young girl, along with a note: "Dear Sir: For twenty-two years I have carried your picture in my wallet. I was only eighteen years old that day that we faced one another on that trail in Chu Lai, Vietnam. Why you did not take my life I'll never know. You stared at me for so long. . . . Forgive me for taking your life."

And the boots. So intimately shaped by those who wore them, yet so universal--the familiar black leather and tough green fabric, the lugged soles bearing the memory of the earth of the Delta or Con Thien--that they seem a symbol for the whole.

Stitched onto the teddy bear are the name tags of Vietnam veterans of Needles, California, all left at The Wall in memory of Jack McKee, killed in Vietnam on January 30, 1968. The bear was made by Diane Funderburg of Needles. People left beer cans, food, packs of smokes. One soldier swiped some cigarettes from a buddy's locker, intending to replace it with two cans of sardines. The buddy was killed. Twenty years later, the man found his name on The Wall and left the sardines. The braid of hair and the picture of the flag-emblazoned house were left in memory of Lewis Dewayne Ross with a note that said: "Wayne, I think of you every day and miss you so much. I love you."

Perhaps it was a brother who left a birthday note with the ball and mitt: "I've missed throwing a baseball to you. . . . You wouldn't believe my three boys and a little girl who have taken your place and play catch with

me." The cowboy boot was wrapped in a bandanna and draped with homemade ribbons like those that celebrate campaigns on regimental standards. The ribbons are embroidered with the name of Warrant Officer John P. Marlow of Pawnee, Oklahoma. Was the Purple Heart perilously won in battle by the man remembered or by the comrade who left it at The Wall, pinned to the fatigue cap? The note reads simply: "Rick, I didn't forget! It just took me awhile."

The wreath, left on Memorial Day 1989, encircled a poem: "To all of you whose names are here./Remember this: you're still held dear...." Watches are among the offerings, some perhaps to mark a moment when time ran out. One, stopped at 10:03, was left at The Wall with this note: "When I held you in my arms you felt cold. I would not let them take you from me for as long as I could. And then you were gone." Along with the dog tags there was a letter. It reads: "To all of you here from Echo Company, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division... I leave you my headband which contains my sweat from the war, my dog tag and a picture of me and Mike. Another time, another place. I'll never forget you."

It was mostly the young who died in Vietnam, and so it is not surprising that among gifts to The Wall are mementos of childhoods not long past. The inscription on the ceramic dog reads: "Built and painted by a 12 year old boy, who died a 21 year old man March 23rd 1968." American flags are frequent offerings. The Park Service gives most of them to such organizations as the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, but any that have inscriptions are retained in the collection. One of those shown below carries the message: "May all of you who died, all of you still missing and all of you who returned home never be forgotten." The flag, dedicated to Charles L. Hoskins, is signed: "Connie."