



HOW MCKEESPORT GOT TO VIETNAM



The United States was directly involved in the military operations of Vietnam's war from 1959 to 1975. This era was possibly the most turbulent and unsettling of any in our Nation's history. Civil rights issues, a youthful counterculture, and the U.S. involvement in Vietnam caused America to be a nation divided. From 1965 to 1969, America's escalation of troops into Vietnam, the reinstitution of the military draft (who were called and who were deferred), and the tactics used to fight the war further established two bitter rival groups – the "Hawks", who totally supported the war in order to protect the free world from Communism at any cost, and the "Doves", who wanted the U.S. out of Vietnam, and peace at any cost. America's fifteen year intervention into Vietnam ended in huge casualties, and for the first time in United States history, without a positive and conclusive end to its military efforts. Veterans returned from Vietnam with open emotional wounds and without the appreciation or recognition necessary from its nation to heal them.

Americans had closed past wars on a positive basis and through healing acts they shared the blame and responsibility with their soldiers: Victory banners, ceremonies, medals and parades were ways to recognize veterans for the sacrifices they made on behalf of their country. Because there was no victory and because America was divided about Vietnam and reached no consensus, no comforting experience existed to satisfy the Vietnam Veterans as to why they had fought. The returned home to find that most Americans avoided talking about Vietnam, wanting to forget about it. This was a most unpopular, unsuccessful and morally confusing partial commitment to an undeclared war. More often, veterans felt that they were treated as the cause of the violence and the reason that there was no victory. Although not the fault of those who answered the call, the failure of a specific American policy to deal with Vietnam often caused the veteran to feel shunned and alone in dealing with his return to civilian life.

Those who answered the call to Vietnam were a disproportionately high percentage of youth, similar to those that made up the racial population mix of America's declining industrial inner cities. Like the World War II veteran, they would be principally from America's low to middle class of wage earners, but unlike in World War II, there would be a higher percentage deferred from the draft because of college or marital status. Many would leave the United States to avoid the draft, and many of those drafted would be minorities not attending college and living in the inner cities. On average, they were nineteen years old, eight years younger than the soldiers who fought in World War II and Korea.

This call to arms was a template that substantially fit the youth of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, and because of the ethnic values of their families and the character-building fostered by its school district and civic organizations such as Sam LaRosa's Boys Club, there would be no strong evidence of the counterculture that divided other parts of the country. Both the McKeesport School District and the Boys Club would represent a large pool to draw from since the average graduating class during the height of the conflict was nearly 1,000, and since more than 10% were affiliated with the Boys Club at one time or another.

In the old mill town of McKeesport, approximately 5,000 students graduated from the high school from 1965 to 1969. Nine times the average amount for a city of this size would be called from McKeesport once the draft was activated in April, 1965. Twenty-three from the community would be killed in Vietnam during this time. During this same time, Sam LaRosa would take nearly 500 new members into his club, and recognize that eleven of the twenty-three killed in action were his boys – Sam's boys. As was the custom in McKeesport, most, if not all, visited the high school and the club before going to basic training, and visited again when they came back on leave before going to Vietnam. For some, it would be the last time they would come home alive. Sam got the notice that Norman Johnson was the club's first casualty. "Boots", as he was known, was killed in Vietnam on December 5, 1965. Through the notice of Jim West's death on September 10, 1966, Sam would receive five similar notices.

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Sam was not about to let any negative sentiments about Vietnam stand in his way of recognizing his boys as true heroes. On Veterans Day, November 1966, he held the first service to honor these five veterans, and dedicated, which is arguably the first, Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the United States. It consists of a rose granite headstone with a bronze plaque that reads "In Memory of McKeesport Boys Club Members Who Have Made The Supreme Sacrifice In The Service Of Their Country". A separate bronze marker for each name is fixed to the plaque. A thirty-three foot flag pole with an American flag is located directly behind the memorial stone. As with his efforts to build the club, Mr. LaRosa went to the community for assistance. The stone was donated by Howell Craft, the landscaping and shrubs were donated by Frank Marnell, and American flag which formally flew over the U.S. capital was donated by local Congressman Elmer J. Holland, House of Representatives, and the flag pole was purchased from Board approved funds of the club.

Sam began a tradition to hold a service each Veteran's Day and Memorial Day openly honoring families of these veterans, and inviting the McKeesport community to also participate – little realizing that by 1969, he would lose six more of his boys and add their names to the monument. The eleven club members killed in Vietnam is the largest number from any one of the 1,100 Boys and Girls Club, as confirmed by their national office. Presumably, it is also the nation's highest number on a percentage basis for any type of club or fraternal organization at the community level. Sam has an 8x10 photo of each of these veterans mounted on a special plaque on the wall in the club's lobby, and had their names read by U.S. Representatives into the Federal Congressional record.

In 1982, the rest of America finally caught up with 69 year old Mr. LaRosa by finally dedicating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Veteran's Day, November 1982 in Washington, D.C.

As with Sam LaRosa, Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran, felt that America needed a healing effort to recognize those who fought in Vietnam, and to honor those who did not come back. Using \$2,800.00 of his own money, he started the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in 1979, finally raising over \$8 million for its construction.

Anyone standing in front of the wall has their own image reflected back at them. Some touch it, others etch the names of those fallen heroes on paper as souvenirs, and some leave notes or mementos. Most leave emotionally struck.

For those who cannot go to Washington to see the actual wall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund built a traveling model in 1996. It is half the size of the original and travels to various requested locations. It is also called "The Wall That Heals". In August of 2000, it was displayed for three days at the park in downtown Irwin, Pennsylvania.

The guns of Vietnam have been silent for nearly 30 years, since Saigon, the South Vietnam capital fell in 1975. However, the generation of Americans that lived through these highly complex times, and especially those who fought during them, have had their lives changed forever. For the Vietnam veterans and their families, there is some comfort, recognition, and healing through the local efforts of Sam LaRosa at the Boys and Girls Club in McKeesport, and through Jan Scruggs and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund in Washington, D.C. Through their dedication, the sacrifices made by Vietnam veterans will always be remembered.

Never Forgotten



The Port Vue - Liberty Rifle Squad Fires a Final Tribute at the LaRosa Services.