

## COMMUNITY INTEREST



It was one of life's special moments. You may know what I mean. My son, Nicolas or "Nick" as we call him, let me know he had booked a flight for me for four days in Washington, D.C., paying for a hotel and my flight to meet him in the city.

It was 50 years to this year I had returned from the Vietnam War as a combat soldier and Purple Heart recipient. I had been saying I was now ready to visit the Vietnam Memorial, but was I really?

The truth is it took the encouragement and support of my son to make the step, years of acknowledging my PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress) and work with other veterans. To say I was anxious is to minimize my feelings. I was scared death. I experienced six fellow soldiers that died in battles in the month of December 1967 alongside me. I needed to touch and etch their names on paper to honor them. I needed to touch the Wall to let them go.

We waited awhile to go to the Vietnam Memorial visiting other Memorials, Museums and landmarks before taking the step. Even thinking of visiting the Memorial brings tears to my eyes. The question is; Can I do it?

After visiting the World War II Memorial, the Korean War Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial we turn the bend to walk to the Vietnam Memorial—my war, my experience one solid year 1967-1968 in combat.

As we come around a bend I see a curve and wall of deep reflective granite. I stop. 58,286 names of those soldiers who died.

Emotions overtake me as my son holds me while I sob. He holds me with love as I leak my emotions.

Tears for those who died next to me

## Tears for my deep pain of 50 years

Tears for the generations of soldiers who preceded me in wars.

## Tears for my traum

## Tears for the sacrifices in serving our Country

I walk with courage to the Wall touching it feeling the power of healing.

My hand becomes part of the history of soldiers before and after me. I'm now ready to look for the six soldier names who died next to me.

My son and I approach a woman Ranger with my list of names. She embraces us with honor. We receive paper and a crayon to etch the names. I ask my son to etch the names because I'm too weak with emotion. The Ranger stays by our side. She senses I'm a wounded warrior.

The last name is too high to reach so she secures a ladder, climbs to the top and etches the name for us.

Immediately after the last name is etched it begins to rain—with thunder.

It's impossible to etch names with a hard rain. Tears from heaven—I Believe.

It's Done: Private First Class John D. Barnett, age 19; Specialist 4 Junius C. Collier, age 21; Private First Class Gordon T. Dalton, age 23; Specialist 4 Anthony Mantouvales, age 27; Private First Class Raymond L. Zimmerman, age 26, Specialist 4 Junior E. Lott, age 24. All confirmed deceased. Fellow warriors of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade I will always remember.