

# **Vietnam Memorial Moving Wall Opening Ceremonies – 8/21/08**

It is impossible to overstate the impact of Vietnam on the lives of Americans over the last 50 years. In 1950 the United States provided military aid to France, who was fighting communist rebels in Indochina. After a French defeat four years later, the country of Vietnam was partitioned into North & South.

Fearing a communist “domino effect” for that region, President Eisenhower, in 1954, committed \$100 million in aid to South Vietnam in its civil war against the north.

In the mid to late ‘50s, back home in Sparta, five area boys- two years separating youngest from oldest- had things to do.

Michael Dunneback, the only son of Ed and Helen Dunneback, had two sisters and at an early age was very involved in the family farm on Six Mile Road and Peach Ridge.

Danny Behm, son of Louis and Kathleen Behm, was a farm boy, too. He had six sisters and was an only son as well. Both Michael and Danny were involved in 4H. They both had horses that took considerable time to groom and train.

Dennis Merryman, son of Ray and Ethel Merryman, was a quiet kid. In a family that eventually grew to eleven in size, a mild voice could easily get lost in the crowd. Dennis played Little League baseball for Algoma Central, east of town.

Bruce Curtis, son of Floyd Curtis and Barbara Wagner, lived with his family on Old Alpine south of the Bow Tie. At the seasoned age of twelve years old, Bruce thought it would be great fun to chase a bear on a fishing trip up in the Munising area. His parents thought differently.

Craig Yates, another only son, belonged to Roland and Marian Yates. Craig was born a day before his sister Cathy’s fourth birthday, and in the summer of 1959 he was a Cub Scout.

Half a world away in 1959, with 760 U.S. military advisors in Vietnam, the first U.S. casualties of the conflict occurred. Major Dale Buis from Nebraska, and Master Sergeant Chester Ovnand from Texas became numbers one and two on the Wall.

In 1962, President Kennedy sent 5,000 Marines and 50 jets to Thailand to stop Communist expansion into Laos.

The South Vietnamese army, in January of '63, suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Vietcong. President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on November 22<sup>nd</sup> of that same year.

An August, 1964, provocation by the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin resulted in a congressional resolution giving President Johnson broad military powers. By December the number of U.S. advisors grew to 23,000.

Air raids over North Vietnam began in 1965. Johnson suspended bombing in December in an effort to get North Vietnam to the peace table. In 1966 after his "peace offensive" failed, bombing resumed.

Back home in 1966 all five boys were well entrenched in typical high school activities- Michael at Kenowa Hills and the other four at Sparta High. Dan's senior year was spent at Kent City.

Michael became an avid snowmobiler, and according to his sister, Pam, "he had every toy there ever was." He could have avoided the draft with responsibilities on the farm, but he wanted to go.

Dan worked on local farms and helped his dad build houses during his high school years. Had senior pictures been full length back then, one could have viewed a spiffed-up Daniel Behm in a nice shirt, tie, and sport coat- from the waist up. From the waist down Dan wore cut-offs- so he could get back to work more quickly.

Dennis was an impeccable dresser. He worked on Norm Parks' farm in high school, inheriting big brother Paul's '57 Chevy when Paul went to Vietnam. In 1967, after graduating in June, Dennis and Barbara Green were wed in August, the only one of the five to be married.

Bruce shot his first deer while in high school, bagging a 12-point behind their house. He played football for Sparta High, loved to fish, and his first car was a '53 Olds. He could never get it running, so he bought a motorcycle. He and Dennis ran around together a lot and were joined by Dan at times, too.

Craig stocked shelves at Groendyk's during high school. He, too, loved cars. Craig and friends Bob Andrus, Lee Snyder, and Ike Rood all went into service together. After Craig's death, Ike visited Mrs. Yates faithfully.

From 1965 to 1968 troop strength grew from 184,000 to more than 530,000. In January of '68, the Tet Offensive was eventually repulsed by the United States and South Vietnamese, but it became for the U.S. a decisive downward turning point in the war. LBJ again offered to suspend bombing, offering peace talks along with it.

President Nixon in 1969 reduced troop strength significantly, calling it "Vietnamization", the turning over of the war to the South Vietnamese army. In November, the term My Lai entered American living rooms- news of a massacre of a small Vietnamese village by U.S. troops.

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On February, 25, 1969, Private First Class Bruce Wayne Curtis (USMC), age 19, was killed in Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam.

On March 5, 1969, Private First Class Michael Arthur Dunneback (U.S. Army), age 19, lost his battle for life in a U.S. Army hospital in Cu Chi, South Vietnam, as a result of burns received in action three days earlier.

On the same day, March 5, Lance Corporal Dennis G. Merryman (USMC), age 19, was killed in action in Quang Nam, South Vietnam. The names of these two are on the same panel, 30West, 5 lines apart.

On May 29, 1969, Corporal Craig Edward Yates (U.S. Army), age 18, was killed in action in Binh Duong, South Vietnam.

And on January 24, 1970, Specialist 4 Daniel Louis Behm (U.S. Army), age 21, was killed in Quang Ngai, South Vietnam.

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Nixon announced in January of 1972 that Henry Kissinger had been in secret negotiations with North Vietnam to bring the war to an end. A year later a cease-fire agreement was signed. The last ground troops left in March of 1973 and American P.O.W.s were released in April.

The Watergate scandal dominated the news for the next 15 months. Nixon resigned the presidency in August of '74, replaced by Grand Rapids' own Gerald R. Ford.

South Vietnam and Cambodia were overrun by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces in April of 1975. On April 29 the last Americans were evacuated from Saigon. That same day the final two U.S. soldiers were killed there- Corporal Charles McMahon of Woburn, Massachusetts, and Lance Corporal Darwin L. Judge of Marshalltown, Iowa.

On Armistice Day in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was unveiled, commemorating the loss of American lives in that tragic conflict. There are over 58,000 names on the wall. Over 2,600 are from Michigan. More than 100 are from the Grand Rapids area. The five mentioned here were the closest geographically to where we live.

They were and still are a part of us. Many in this gathering tonight treasure their memories. We are all here, regardless of political persuasion or point of view, to honor them.