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## Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall of Faces

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Adjacent to The National Mall in Washington, DC is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, better known as “The Wall.” Organized by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), The Wall sees about 3.5 million visitors each year (Peterson, 2016, n.p.). The mission of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund is, “to ensure a society in which all who have served and sacrificed in our nation’s Armed Forces are properly honored and receive the recognition they justly deserve” (The, 2016, n.p.). One of the ways in which the VVMF is extending their memorial beyond the iconic Wall in Washington, DC is the Virtual Wall of Faces (<http://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces/>).

For each name on The Wall there is now an online profile featuring a photograph and personal information about that service member on the Virtual Wall of Faces. These virtual profiles bring a level of personalization to the overwhelming 58,307 names featured on The Wall. For example, Figure 1 below depicts the profile for MAJ Rainford Tiffin.

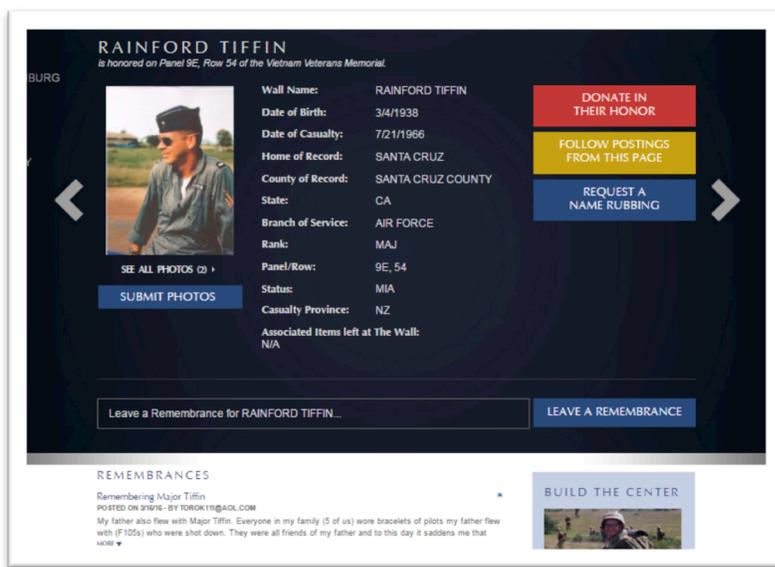


Fig. 1. Screenshot of MAJ. Rainford Tiffin’s profile on the Virtual Wall of Faces website

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then these webpages help to tell the stories of the sons, husbands, fathers, daughters, friends, and neighbors honored on The Wall. Visitors can search for a specific name or simply peruse through the archive to learn about the life and sacrifice of a complete stranger. Under each personal profile, family members, friends, battle buddies, and visitors have the opportunity to add a memory or personal sentiment to share with the community. Here is an example of one touching remembrance that shows the impact this project has on the entire community:

I also have Major Rainford Tiffin's POW/MIA bracelet. I have had it since the mid 70's. I had always hoped to meet him and give it to him. If any family members read this, please know that I have treasured this bracelet with his name on it and have the utmost respect for him and his family that lost him in service to our country. If family members would like his bracelet, I will respectfully and happily get it to you. (Rainford, n.d., n.p.)

### **Personal Review**

Visitors to The Wall are often struck by the sheer size of the memorial, particularly given the fact that each panel only contains names, and not unit information, birthday, etc. To see 58,000 names laid out one after another across 70 panels of dark stone provides an incredible gravitas of the human cost of the Vietnam War.

While visitors to The Wall of Faces may have a smaller viewing window (only the size of a computer monitor), the depth to which one can explore each American casualty is far greater. Each veteran's profile gives a glimpse into their life story including their photo, service branch, rank, date of birth, and home of record. For example, that one name now becomes a handsome 20-year old Marine from rural Ohio with a dimpled smile. The other photos uploaded by family show that he filled out quite a bit from his high school football days. Casualty information and comments left by

battle buddies attest to the courageous character found within this young, but mature Lance Corporal. Multiple comments of “Semper Fi, Marine” demonstrate the unique brotherhood found within the Corps. That one name is now a young man with family who miss him dearly and Marine brothers who honor his memory and treasure the moments shared together.

Though The Wall monument has an incredible impact on visitors, there are inherent shortcomings as well. Traveling to Washington, DC is not financially or logistically feasible for many Americans, particularly the aging and ailing generation of Vietnam veterans. While the enormity of The Wall is impactful because of its lack of details, there is also so much more behind each name that is lost in the brevity. The Wall of Faces helps to overcome these two challenges. It increases the accessibility to many who would not otherwise be able to learn about the memorial, and it restores an incredible amount of humanity missing in the stone carving.

Even though I have previously visited The Wall in Washington, DC, the Wall of Faces was a refreshing modernization of the memorial. Reading the memories posted by childhood friends helped to bring the veterans’ stories to life and the sentiments of visitors was truly touching. In searching through the VVMF website, I also learned a few additional facts about The Wall that I didn’t know before. As of 2015, there were 58,307 names, and among those names are 151 Medal of Honor recipients, 8 female nurses and 16 clergy. On The Wall itself, many have asked why the names were not arranged alphabetically to make it easier to locate a specific individual. The Wall’s designer (Maya Ling) chose to arrange the names in chronological order by date of casualty so that those veterans who died together could forever be linked. Now, with the virtual Wall of Faces, their names, photos, and stories will be immortalized and accessible to visitors around the world.

### **What can you do?**

Begin by visiting and exploring the site. Not only does The Wall of Faces give visitors a chance to learn more about this national monument, it is also a chance for American citizens to put

into action their “never forget” sentiments. Several other ways to get involved and honor the fallen through this memorial are as follows:

- Contribute to the collection by sending in photos or remembrances of family members, community members, or neighbors. The Wall of Faces was launched in June 2014, and the collection of images and memories is still ongoing. In fact, you may be able to help contribute to the effort by finding photos or information about veterans from your hometown. To date, only 11 states have a photo for all of their veterans.
- Search through The Wall and learn the story behind the face of someone you don't know.
- For those working in an education setting, you may be able to creatively incorporate The Wall of Faces into your curriculum. A few history classes have integrated The Wall of Faces into a school project where students learn about, and connect with, a specific individual from the Vietnam War. (The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, 2016, n.p.)
- For social workers or counselors working with Vietnam Veteran clients, this could be a great resource to help aging veterans connect with the memorial without traveling to the DC area.
- Donate to the VVMF to help fund the Education Center at The Wall in Washington, DC. This physical building will provide visitors with the opportunity to further interact with the photos and stories featured on the Wall of Faces.

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