Saying goodbye at the wall

The following was written by Charles F. Howlett '88, who is an administrator in the Amityville Public School System and an adjunct professor at Adelphi University. Dr. Howlett, who received his graduate degrees from SUNY at Albany and Columbia University, is the author of Troubled Philosopher: John Dewey and the Struggle for World Peace, The American Peace Movement: History and Historiography and The American Peace Movement: References and Resources.

T HIS PAST SPRING I visited Washington, D.C. Although I had been there many times previously, this trip held special importance. I had finally mustered up the courage to visit the Vietnam Memorial. When I approached the information booth seeking the name of a college classmate, I drew a blank. For about five minutes, I stood around trying to recall his full name. It finally came to me and the printout I received read as follows: VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL, Washington, D.C., 04/06/91. Last Name: EGAN, Given Name: FRANCIS XAVIER, Rank: CAPT., Branch of Service: AIR FORCE, Birthday: 11 Nov. 46, Casualty Date: 19 Dec. 72, Home Town of Record: FOREST HILLS, NY. Panel: 01W, Line Number: 096.

My wife and I, along with our two small boys, slowly walked to the center of the long, V-shaped memorial. The black, granite-panelled wall we approached had the date November 11, 1975 inscribed on it. The printout indicated that Frank's birthday was the same day as the dedication of the memorial—ironic, perhaps! I began searching in earnest for Frank's name. I was having difficulty locating it. My wife then read the instructions on the back of the printout: "The number identifying a certain panel is located every 10 lines on the edge of the even-numbered panels. They are used to help find the line on which a name appears. Count down from the line on which the name appears. Count down from the top."

Not far from the bottom of the panel I found his name. Holding back the tears, I touched his name. At last, after more than 20 years, I finally said goodbye—for good.

Frank and I celebrated our graduation from college 23 years ago. We had spent four years at Marist College. There were times when we wondered if we would ever comprehend what a daunting partcle was or even a split infinitive. Grasping the essentials of "ego development" was even less reassuring. But somehow we had made it through to graduation. We had learned much in those four years.

As athletes—Frank was on the crew team and I played soccer—we took assurance in our ability to succeed. Adversity and defeat could be coped with, but never completely accepted. We knew, or at least we thought we did, what it would take to win. Graduating from college only helped reinforce that view. Was it not up to our generation to carry the mantle of leadership? In the aftermath of the Kennedy's and King assassinations, it was left in our hands to make America a better place to live. Not only better, but stronger and safer. Indeed, the torch had been passed or so we thought.

At the conclusion of the commencement exercise, we shook hands and wished each other well. "See you at the next alumni gathering," was my parting message. But as things turned out, we never saw each other again.

Frank enlisted in the Air Force OCS program. He earned his wings and a trip to Nam. I, on the other hand, managed to buy a one-year reprieve thanks to a graduate teaching assistantship. The next year, having initially enlisted in the reserves, I was placed on extended active duty in the Marine Corps. I don't remember that much about top secret communications anymore.

I resumed my doctoral studies after being released from active duty. American military involvement in Vietnam had been dwindling down. Only one month before the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, President Richard Nixon ordered the resumption of bombing of Hanoi. Frank was killed on one of those missions.

Just one more lousy month, I kept thinking as I stood in front of the panel and looked at the name Francis Xavier Egan. All I could think of were the words of Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote: "Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land, drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows. In the great hour of destiny they stand; Each with his feuds, and jealousies and sorrows. Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win, some flaming, fatal clash with their lives. Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin, they think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives."

Staring at Frank's name on the panel evoked many fond memories of our college years. I don't recall anyone saying something negative about Frank. Although somewhat shy, he always could be counted on when duty called—the true mark of any veteran. That December of 1972, Frank performed his duty like many veterans before and after him have done and continue to do.

Unfortunately, Frank paid the ultimate price. He was barely 26 years old. There would be no firelit home, clean bed, or a wife for Frank to come home to. But Frank, like millions of other veterans, deserves this special day of recognition. For Frank, it would have been especially meaningful—after all, he was brought into this world on this date. Ironically, so was I.

On what would have been your 45th birthday, Frank, I salute you as a veteran and as a friend. My birthday drink is in your honor. Although I am still here watching my hair slowly turn gray, I feel empty that you are not present so we could toast each other. Sadly, you never had the chance to carry the mantle of leadership for very long. Just one more irony in the lessons of life.