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# Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Powerful, evocative and haunting, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is Washington's first truly interactive memorial. When you first approach, the memorial's human scale and structural simplicity does little to prepare you for its emotional impact. But walk along the gleaming black walls etched with seemingly endless rows of names of the 58,226 soldiers killed or reported missing in action in Vietnam, and it delivers a potent message for all ages about the wound that is war.



The memorial is the brainchild of Vietnam veteran **Jan Scruggs**. Scruggs was wounded in Vietnam but survived his tour of duty, although many of his friends did not. He envisioned a memorial in Washington, paid for entirely by public donations

A visitor makes a rubbing of one of the names

“that would help heal a nation divided by this conflict”. At the time, Vietnam was a war that many wanted to forget.

Ridiculed by the press and the butt of many jokes, Scruggs's fledgling organisation made national news when it was learned that they had only raised \$114.50. But as the jokes made their rounds, more and more people heard of his goals. Slowly at first, and then faster, donations began pouring in. By 1980, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation had raised almost \$9 million.

The memorial was designed by 21-year-old college student **Maya Ling Yin**, whose plan was chosen from more than 1,000 entries in a national competition. Standing at the site, she said she “envisioned a wound in the earth”. Her resulting design is an exercise in the dramatic power of understatement, consisting of two walls of black granite, each nearly 250 feet long, that meet, appropriately, in a broad V.

The entire structure lies below ground level. Each wall begins at just a few inches high and gently descends to where the walls join, at

## Vital Statistics

- Designer: Maya Ying Lin
- Dedication: 13 November, 1982
- Cost: \$4,284,000
- Material: black granite from Bangalore, India
- Total length: 493 ft 6 in



which point they are over 10 feet tall. The monument is made of black granite imported from India, and the entire length of its angled surface is etched with uniform letters spelling out the names of the dead and missing.

**Above:** The wall of names of those who gave their lives during the Vietnam War makes a simple but powerful statement

(Those who are known dead are marked with a diamond; 11,000 names of soldiers missing in action are marked with a cross.) No mention is made of rank or status, leaving only the sense of a lost human life.

Eventually, traditionalists lobbied the government to add two statues with more conventional themes. At the west end of the site, a **sculpture of three soldiers** created by Frederick Hart captures the fear and uncertainty of the Vietnam War. At the eastern entrance, a **large bronze** by Glenna Goodacre serves as a tribute to the 11,000 women who served in Vietnam.

**Inset:** The memorial's designer **Maya Ling Yin**

## TAKING A BREAK

An alternative to the lunch trucks is to walk or take a taxi to the Asian-inspired American cuisine of the **Garden Café** in the State Plaza Hotel on F Street between 21st and 22nd.

📍 194 A3 📧 Bacon Drive and Constitution Avenue 📞 (202) 426-6841  
 🕒 Daily 8 am–11:45 pm; closed 25 Dec 📺 Smithsonian/FoggyBottom  
 🆓 Free

## VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL: INSIDE INFO

**Top tip** Every year, thousands of **offerings** are left along the wall: flowers, military medals, cigarettes, even toys. All items are gathered up by staff and given to the Museum of American History, where a small portion of the collection is on display.