

# *A Soldier's Reflections*

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## FREDERICK DOWNS, JR.

When I look at the Wall—as Maya Lin's polished granite Vietnam Veterans Memorial has come to be known—I know the exact spot where my name could have been, but for the quickness of a Medivac helicopter crew and the supreme skills of a battlefield surgeon. The Wall is abstract, reducing the entirety of the Vietnam War experience to a simple stone slab. I feel relief at my escape.

When I turn and look across the grass, I see Frederick Hart's three bronze soldiers at the tree line. This memorial does not attempt to make abstract what is complex—the experience of combat; the groans, cries, and muttering inside a Quonset hut hospital; our own, and others', brutality; the incomprehensible act of killing; the incomparable horror of watching another human being die. The Wall reminds me that I am one of three million men and women who served in the Vietnam War, who sacrificed, bled, and died because that is what we were asked to do. The bronze figures of Frederick Hart's memorial remind me that I am more than that. They remind me of my humanity.

War is not an abstraction, to me or to anyone touched by its evil. A man killed, a woman widowed, a child orphaned—in Hart's soldiers I see the grief of all of them. I feel their sadness in my heart, and yet I have never been able to express my experience. I only know that it is too powerful to be forgotten. This is why the three bronze soldiers mean so much to me, and to other veterans of the Vietnam War. While many of us suppressed our war memories, relegating them to the area reserved for the imponderables—death, God, the universe—Frederick Hart captured and clarified those memories, creating an icon that speaks to us, and about us.

The three soldiers made of bronze are recognizable. When I look at them, I think: *This is something I understand, those soldiers are me, I am them.* I recognize the looks, the postures. That is what I have been trying, and failing, to describe. I can see in front of me what has been in my mind.

When I look at them, moments of brutality during the war merge with moments of bewildered grief after the war's end. Not a day goes by that I am not reminded of the Vietnam War, and thoughts rush through me like a storm surge. The three soldiers give me a sense of relief and peace. There is some resolution for those undefinable thoughts, for the search for meaning.

Each time I see the three figures, I think, *I am them and they are me.* They will always show the world the way I was at twenty-three. They will be my testament that the war happened. They will portray me for a millennium, long after I have returned to the earth as dust and the war itself is forgotten.

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Frederick Downs, Jr. is a Vietnam War veteran and the author of *The Killing Zone*, *My Life in the Vietnam War*, and other books on the subject.