

Writing with the Wall: Inventing Memory of the Vietnam War

Sam Hamilton

"Too bad it wasn't a simple war. Then we could put up a heroic statue of a couple of Marines and leave it at that."

—Jan Scruggs, Vietnam Veteran,
co-founder Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund



Figure 1: Photograph by Elsa Hamilton, Date Unknown

Two men and a small child kneel by a reflective black surface. The bodies of each of the three are quiet; they have been kneeling for some time. Kneeling and thinking. The arm of the older man touches the wall, his presence over the child both protective and instructive; he's pointing something out on the surface of the wall. Writing crawls across the surface. An understanding of location emerges. A wall, reflective, black, low, quiet repose, thought, touching. This is the Vietnam Wall.

The stone walkway and drainage gutter next to the wall suggest two things: this is the Wall in DC and this is at least several years after the 1982 grand opening of the memorial. The grain and color date the photo, as does the younger man's loud shirt and the massive 35mm camera slung over the older man's shoulder. This is the mid-1980s.

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Properly dating the picture as from the mid-1980s eliminates the possibility that the name is that of the father of the small child. Given photographic conventions at tourist sites, therefore, the role of “father” likely belongs to one of the two men depicted, most probably the younger of the two. Clues also link the younger man to older man: small frames, sinewy forearms, a favoring of the left leg when kneeling. The three figures are related. A grandfather, a grandchild, a father. This is generational.

Why touch the wall? What on its surface is there to point out? Whose name is significant to these figures? The name the grandfather touches is distant from the vertex, so though its date cannot be pinpointed, it is removed from the date associated with the first name on the wall, 1955. Possibly a brother or sister, either biological or at-arms, of the grandfather? This ascribes youth to the grandfather he does not seem to possess: he has a grown son, himself the father of a small child. The father then: a brother or sister, either biological or at-arms? But if a brother-at-arms, why is the grandfather touching the name? The name is significant to both men in the photograph, and it is a name they wish to point out and share with the child. This is the name of a fallen son or daughter of the grandfather, a fallen sister or brother of the father. This is the aunt or uncle of the child.

And this is one of the few interactions the child will have with the name and person the name represents. Dead before the child was born, the aunt or uncle is only a name, some photographs or footage, maybe a letter. So too does the context from which the name emerged exist through vestiges: iconic images, archived news footage, letters, poems, stories, movies. Traces. Sound and images, signifying nothing? Everything? The only thing? So what’s the name and what is Vietnam to the child? And who is the child? That was me. This was I. The author of this essay.

Since its construction in 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—the “Wall”—has been both a part of and builder of cultural memories of the Vietnam War. Just how the Wall helps shape memories of Vietnam has been the subject of detailed analyses and critiques across a wide range of disciplines, from architecture to history to aesthetics to political science. The diverse approaches used to make sense of the Wall reflect the diverse ways in which the Wall has been and can be used to “make sense” of Vietnam. In his richly detailed history of the memorial, Patrick Hagopian highlights the silence of the Wall. Echoing the sentiments of designer Maya Lin, as well as government officials all the way up to President Reagan, Hagopian suggests that the quietness of Wall-as-memorial is meant to soothe visitors like the calming hush of a lullaby. Kristin Ann Hass challenges this notion to a degree, pointing

to the tradition of leaving items at the base of the Wall. For Hass, these personal items—from pictures to motorcycles—strike up a dialogue with the names on the Wall and tell an ever-expanding number of new and different (hi)stories, and also a seemingly grand, unifying story of the Vietnam War and its veterans. Both Kim Theriault and Marita Sturken see a healing potential in all these (hi)stories. In their respective essays, they liken the Wall to a screen on which viewers can see themselves in relation to the Vietnam War. The shiny, black surface of the Wall reflects the faces of visitors over the names. This literal reflection generates a figurative reflection of the many different (hi)stories of Vietnam. Simply, visitors see themselves reflected in the names of fallen soldiers, and they reflect on their relationship to these soldiers, as well as stories about these soldiers.

Ultimately, I believe the answer lies in the simple type of writing that helps to make the Wall popular among children and the most visited memorial in DC: the rubbing. The process of taking a rubbing from the Wall can be conceived of as a heuristic for inventing cultural memory of the Vietnam War. By rubbing over the presence of imagistic cultural and personal artifacts, one reveals an outline of absence, itself a more accurate re-presentation of Vietnam than any in cultural or personal memory.

Though diverse, the analyses of the Wall's role in constructing cultural and individual memory are limited in two significant ways: they focus on the space of the memorial as a repository of memories, and they focus on the Vietnam generation as the only visitors with proper access to these memories. This implies a deadness about the Wall, as though all one needs to do to understand its mysteries is crack open a tomb and start piecing together a past from the bones inside. The Wall-as-tomb metaphor can be understood within the larger metaphorical system of memory-as-archaeology. In this system, memories are unearthed or excavated, meaning is exhumed and historical mysteries are shelved for future consideration or tossed in the scrap heap. This makes sense if you have, within the landscape of your mind, bones of memory: photos from your time as a soldier, letters from your time as a protestor, a draft card, a thousand-yard stare, an image of a white Volkswagen slowly crunching over the snow on your driveway, a dour man in an olive overcoat burdened by horrible news walking toward your front door, behind which your mother (my grandmother) has already fainted dead away.

But what about those with no actual memory of Vietnam? What about the boy in the picture? What about me? For me, the Wall *does* mean something. More accurately, the Wall and I *do* something. While prior analyses—mostly from the 1980s and 1990s—rightly focus on the Wall's significance to the veterans it sought to memorialize, as well as

their generation, now, over thirty years after the Wall's construction, perhaps it's time to shift emphasis to the next generation, the first of every subsequent generation that will have no actual memories of Vietnam. What will the Wall mean for my generation and what will my generation do with it? Since future generations have no *memory* to excavate, how will the Wall help to invent cultural and individual memory for generations with no experience of the Vietnam War or era? What of mental landscapes devoid of memorial artifacts? When I visit the Wall, I bring no artifacts of memory, no remnants of past experiences with my uncle. But I do leave with something. I leave with a rubbing.

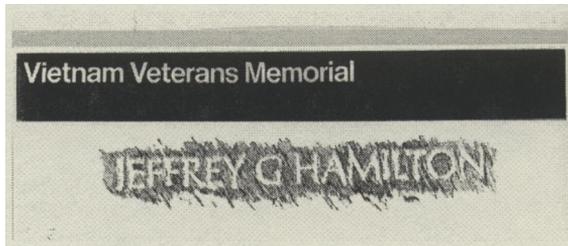


Figure 2: Rubbing of "Jeffrey G. Hamilton" made by author, Fall 2004

The act of making and taking a rubbing from the Wall is, in some ways, akin to the Surrealist technique of frottage. Conceptualized and employed as an "automatic" creative method by Max Ernst, frottage borrows its technique from the practice of making paper copies of three-dimensional objects such as brass monuments, stone carvings or grave markers. Quite simply, you place a piece of tracing paper over a textured object, and scrape a piece of charcoal or graphite over the surface of the paper. In doing so, you create an outline of the texture beneath the paper, coloring in the raised portions, while leaving the indented portions blank. In a 1936 article entitled "In the Light of Surrealism," Georges Hugnet and Margaret Scolari maintain that frottage intends to "[reveal] with infinite variety the otherwise invisible secrets of objects" (24). For Surrealists, there was a randomness to the designs captured by frottage that isn't present when making a rubbing at the Wall. Wall rubbings are directed, intentional. Visitors seek out the name they wish to capture. This process is quite different from the apocryphal tale of Ernst "discovering" frottage by capturing random patterns in the wood grain of his floor. Theriault suggests visitors make a rubbing of the Wall to reveal secrets relating to remorse and sorrow. "They make a rubbing," she writes, "to connect to the memorial ... to mitigate pain with the gesture as if by touching the name they could absorb a bit of the sorrow associated with it" (426). Hagopian claims the secrets are much simpler. For him, the rubbings "provide a durable trace of physical

contact with the wall" (359). Autobiographically, neither reason gets at why I made a rubbing of my uncle's name. My sorrow is removed from his name. I experience it through the sorrow of my father. Yet the rubbing is much more than a souvenir, physical evidence of those times I've visited the Mall in DC.

I made my first rubbing of my uncle's name for my father. I had heard some stories about Jeff from my father and grandparents, anecdotes about his sense of humor and his shocking decision to enlist. I knew nothing of his time in the Army, nor of his death on March 22, 1968. In a sense, I knew him through snippets. I had no story of my own. I brought these borrowed stories with me to the Wall. They were motivation. But while I thought they were only motivating me to do something kind and thoughtful for my father, they turned out to be a sort of prompt for crafting my own story of Jeff. The first act of putting pencil to paper to obtain a rubbing was the same act of putting pencil to paper to draft a story. It was a beginning, an opening. If the ether from which a story's idea springs is the mind with all its cultural, historical and personal baggage, then so too was the blank space of my first rubbing: my uncle's name. It was an absence that brought forth, violently and for the first time, a presence: my uncle himself. The Wall's most lasting rhetorical power, therefore, lies not just in its role as a memorial text-to-be-read, but also in its role as tool for inventing memorial texts.

Rubbing over a name on the Wall created a presence (the white name highlighted in dark scrapings) from an absence (the indented carvings on the Wall). Similarly the name itself is both a presence and an absence, a present signifier with an absent signified. For my father and grandfather, filling in the details of the absent signified requires a process of remembering, reflecting on their past experiences with the person the name signifies, recalling interactions and conversations. It is, perhaps, an archaeological process. I lack the details with which to supplement the present signified. In the absence of an actual memory of a Jeff, I am lost if asked to remember him. I have to create him. As a first step, I might read letters or look at old pictures or movies about him, or ask other people what they might know about him. I piece together a biography, itself the stand-in for an actual memory. But this biography is never of the person. It is composed of fragments, traces that highlight the person without explicitly or directly singling him out. In the end, I feel I know him well, very well, perhaps even better than some who have met him, though I myself have not. Making a rubbing of Jeff's name inspires this act of creation, this invention of memory. Upon making a present name by tracing over the absence left by its indentation at the Wall, one can move to invent a memory of the person whom that name signifies by tracing through and over his

present absence and absent presence, his indentations in personal and cultural memorial artifacts.

Properly, my invention of a memory of my uncle begins with the rubbing (Figure 2). The guide station set apart from the Wall provides both the “official” paper onto which one makes a rubbing, as well as a book indicating the panel and line location of the name one seeks. Jeffrey G. Hamilton. KIA March 22, 1968. Panel 45E, Line 56. Making a rubbing is simple, belying its emotional, historical, theoretical, and personal significance. Making a rubbing of Jeff’s name asks a question, why? which insists upon a perhaps more significant question, who? I start with my only content knowledge of Jeff: his stock military photo (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Jeff’s Military Photo, Photographer and Date Unknown

For many years, I only vaguely understood that this fresh-faced young man who appeared in my grandfather’s study was important to my grandparents, my father, and me. The photograph in Figure 3 still begs the question. Though a face supplements the name, and the uniform of an officer-in-training supplements the face, the memory of Jeff is still an early draft. His memory plagiarizes those of other soldiers, blank expression, clean grooming, crisp lines, averted gaze.

My father provides further images and stories. Research. The memory of Jeff expands. December 1957 (Figure 4), Jeff celebrates his eleventh birthday. My father is 7, my grandfather 43.



Figure 4: Jeff's Birthday, December, 31 1957; Photograph by Elsa Hamilton

Though I am able to see my face in the eyes and closed-lip smile of my father, I'm struck by the toys next to Jeff's cake. A radio of some kind. Soldiers, at varying stages of battle, some fallen, some prepared for war, scattered in front of the cake. A toy rocket, a weapon of war. I ask my father about the model. "I think grandpa was happier to give that gift than Jeff was to get it," he says. "It's the Nike Ajax rocket." The first anti-aircraft missile in US history. "Your grandpa loved models like that," my father says. "I've got a bunch of his old boat models. Carriers, a subchaser. He served on that one in North Africa." A war theme in the gifts, and in the family. Was it a decision or a tradition when Jeff joined the Army nine years later? I'm suddenly suspicious of my GI Joes.

Jeff, 14, and my father, 11, play chess (Figure 5). The brothers are deeply engrossed, so much so that they do not look up to smile as one



Figure 5: Jeff and Ron Playing Chess; Date and Photographer Unknown

of my grandparents snaps the shot. A shirt, baseball mitt, and a coiled, toy snake lie nearby, unused, discarded. A return net for pitching practice is set up, but ignored. Chess consumes their attention. They are cerebral. This makes sense for my father, a librarian and poet. This is new information concerning Jeff.

The photograph in Figure 6 further captures the brothers' quirky, creative intelligence. My father plays melody on the keyboard of my grandmother's organ while Jeff operates the bass pedals. Again they ignore the photographer.

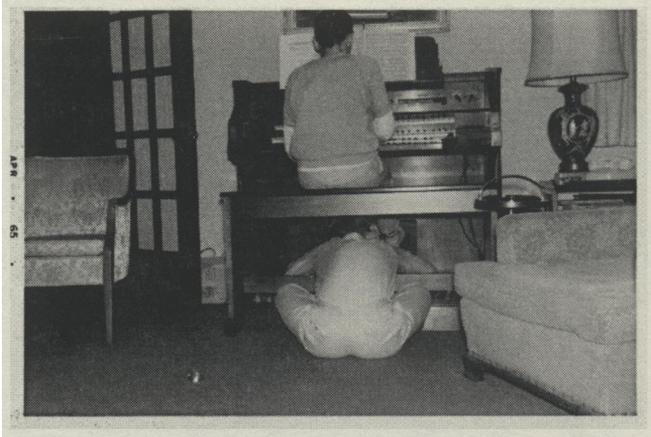


Figure 6: Jeff and Ron Play the Organ; Date and Photographer Unknown

A change of setting, a change of subjects (Figure 7). New elements emerge: a sense of humor, the blemishes of youth, a smile. The accoutrements on his desk imply a certain degree of studiousness (a stack of books, an open notepad) and worldliness (an open newspaper or magazine, pen at the ready for underlining). Perhaps a friend or roommate snapped the photo during a study break, Jeff playing the part of a clown to lighten the mood and ease the tensions of hard studying. Or perhaps the books remained unopened, the pen sat to complete a crossword or doodle mustaches and spectacles on pictures of Kennedy or Johnson. Jeff did, after all, flunk out of college, a fact that perplexed my grandparents and father.

An eighth image opens the writing further (Figure 8). June 1966. My father's birthday this time. He is 16, Jeff is 19. Jeff is slight, smaller and shorter than my father, closer in size to my grandfather. His dress and posture is also patterned after that of my grandfather, sharp shirt, tucked in. While my father's open, untucked and rumpled shirt fits with my understanding of him as a "free spirit" in the mid-1960s on into later life, Jeff is polished. Clean. Professional. Though his arm rests



Figure 7: Jeff Goofing Around; Date and Photographer Unknown

on the back of the stove, it is not there for support. He is not leaning, even slightly, as my father is. It is precise posture, an intentional stance. He is showing off both the firm press on his right sleeve as well as ring on his right hand. An Army officer's ring. The precision of an officer's uniform. He is a military man now.

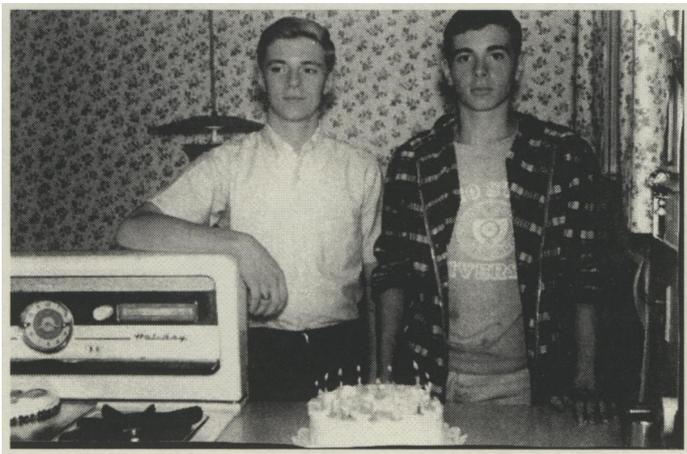


Figure 8: Ron's Birthday; June 25, 1966; Photographer Unknown

Though presented linearly, how I came to understand these images is more in line with the process of making a rubbing. The military photo traces over the rubbing of Jeff's name, just as the picture of Jeff's birthday presents trace over his military photo, yielding the Hamilton's family history of war. "There's been a Hamilton in every major American war, from the Revolution to Vietnam," my father often says. The proudly displayed ring and crisply pressed sleeve traces this familial stoicism in Jeff, which is unsettled by the images of him goofing around with his free-spirited brother or college friends. There's a playfulness to Jeff, and a cerebral quality. He plays chess and makes music and fights in wars. No image reveals anything substantial absent the other. But when the images are laid on top of each other, I invent an ever-expanding story about my uncle. Like any story, it could be total fiction. Perhaps he's clowning around at Officer Training School, or perhaps his ring isn't an officer's ring at all. Maybe he felt the pull of a military tradition, or maybe he just lined his soldiers up on the stairs to wage giant and seemingly meaningless battles on alien landscapes, as I did with my toys, the fantasies of young boys. Whatever the case, the process of overlaying images indicates that the making of a rubbing not only asks the motivating question that encourages the invention of memory, it also suggests the method by which that invention might take place.

But these pictures and anecdotes are not enough. Images and stories of his youth don't seem to get to the layering process described by Ron Burnett in *How Images Think*. Burnett understands such a process as

Images piled upon images. Memories contained by images in frames. Ideas that move far beyond what individual images signify. The process of layering through language and analysis, as well as through the exploration of "seeing" leads in *many different directions*. (17, emphasis mine)

Though each picture and anecdote seems to develop the memory of Jeff further, the writing seems unidirectional, one-sided. Surely there can be more depth to my memory of him than "he had a sense of humor" and "he was a little bit vain." Surely I can conduct more research, complete more writing, invent more or better memories. Surely Jeff is more than the standardized and sterilized images of a family photo album.

Through images from a family photo album, I can't help but see Jeff as a sympathetic figure: a little kid, my father's playmate, my uncle who was killed in Vietnam. He is not caught engaging in any pernicious activities, he does not cast furtive glances at the lens. Yet, cultural memory of the Vietnam War motivates my desire to delve deeper with my invented memory of Jeff. Simply, his photos don't look like the photos of the Vietnam I know. His crisp uniform and grooming aren't noticeable in the shots of grimy, shirtless soldiers humping through

jungle. His casual smile does not respond to “Accidental Napalm” or bodies piled like cordwood in a mass grave outside My Lai. It is not likely that the song he and my father play at my grandmother’s organ is “Ride of the Valkyries” or “Wooly Bully.” These are the limitations of personal memories and personal memorials such as photo albums. They are unidirectional; they do not capture the multiplicity of reality, reflecting instead one side of a Manichean world: Jeff is good. He is funny, a good son and brother, playful, studious, cerebral. He is a soldier.

A final image, Figure 9. June 1966. Jeff is a second lieutenant in First Air Cavalry Division, Custer’s division, Garry Owen!



Figure 9: Jeff at Home in Uniform; June 1966, Photographer Unknown

The image is similar to the standard stock military photo, and also different. Jeff seems older, slight wrinkles under his right eye, smile marks on both cheeks. His hair has grown out since the stock photo, though it is still closely cropped. He smiles, though not impishly as in Figure 7, nor wryly as in Figure 8. It is a self-assured smile. He is an officer, he is proud. But dark shadows rest over Jeff’s eyes. He will do malevolent things (from his letters: “I... got a little mad, so I leaned around & shot the bum” and “we just crawled up and dropped 6 fragmentation grenades in on Charlie at the same time. We got tossed about a bit by the boom, but weren’t scratched. Charles-of-the-bunker got tired of shooting after a little bombing raid”). Yet there is a relaxed serenity to his stature. He is who he is: playful brother, respectful son, proud soldier, ambivalent killer, re-remembered uncle. This is my uncle Jeff.

The conventions of family photography mediate images of Jeff the boy; the conventions of culture mediate the images of Jeff the soldier in Vietnam. Within this context, no memories are actual, but they are all equally real. I *know* my uncle, Lieutenant Jeffrey G. Hamilton. Perhaps Jeff walks, casually, yet intentionally, from a mass of burning napalm, children of various ages fleeing the heat, skin and flesh dripping from their small frames. Perhaps he holds a gun to a prisoner's head, calm and unperturbed, before pulling the trigger. Perhaps Jeff has a gun held to his head, grimacing in anticipation before going suddenly, quickly, quietly blank as his captor pulls the trigger. Or maybe Jeff strives confidently up the banks of a jungle river, shirtless, wearing a cavalry hat, and looking for that next wave. Or maybe he mimes a jumping kick after a Vietnamese citizen steals his camera. Was it the same "accursed rage" felt by Achilles that generated his casual malevolence toward the VC ("I ... got a little mad ... & shot the bum")? Did he look to the soldiers in his platoon as his beloved sons for whom flights of angels sang to their rest? When the sniper's bullet struck Jeff on March 22, 1968, I wonder if he threw his arms out, Christ-like, as the soldiers in his platoon watched in horror. Did his final breath escape him, "gargling from his froth-corrupted lungs" as he died, such that we might question, like Wilfred Owen, whether *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*?

Neither I, nor any and all future visitors to the Wall have access to the reality of the names on that Wall or of Vietnam, save through the images and stories that mediate them in personal and cultural memory. The memory these visitors invent at the Wall will always be mediated by representations of cultural memory. But then again, so too were memories invented by past visitors to the Wall who possessed real memories. As Burnett indicates, "very little of what is described as real exists in isolation of its double as image and text" (31). Tagg adds in his introduction to *The Burden of Representation*, "What is real is not just the material item, but also the discursive system of which the image it bears is part" (4). This is hard to swallow if you think that your memories are real. Understanding an ever-evolving, re-creating, open, discursive system of memories built upon the ceaseless interplay of the real and its imaged and written double represents a challenge. Writing a memory of Jeff with the Wall is not only a difficult, lengthy and complicated process, it is also potentially affronting. It is easy to remember him as a playful brother, hard to remember him as an ambivalent killer. Easy to think of him playing chess, hard to think of him executing a VC prisoner. Easy to see him in polished, pressed military garb, hard to see his dirtied, bloodied body.

But difficult images are just as real as easy ones. I can't deny a culturally crafted image as easily as I could if I felt that my memory

was unimpeachably real. All is fair, and all is accurate. While one's reasons for abandoning so-called illegitimate images may truly stem from those images' illegitimacy, they just as likely stem from that person's personal refusal to accept their legitimacy. (A common example is the Vietnam Vet's blanket dismissal of a film like *Platoon* as "inaccurate" because it "wasn't like that at all.") But because provocative or challenging images of Jeff do not threaten any truly real memory I have of him, I do not need to adopt a defensive posture towards them or the inventive process I associated with the Wall. I do not need to protect Jeff from the uncomfortable truth of his occasional badness, and I am free to question the lionizing truth of his occasional goodness. I do not need to reject claims of his victimization, nor do I need to accept claims that he never victimized. Instead, through taking a rubbing from the Wall, I can identify the ways in which the presence of his name—of him—is written by the overlaid interplay of conflicting, confusing, controversial, and complex cultural texts and images of Vietnam, while the absence of his name remains unmarked by singular texts of good and bad, victim, and victimizer.

Two men and a small child kneel by a reflective black surface. The child doesn't know what to make of the Wall, but the Wall knows what to make with the child.



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