Written by **Peggy Mengis**

Reprinted with permission from The New American Magazine, February 1988

Moving Wall

No conflict since the War Between the States has so polarized the nation as has the Vietnam Conflict. War was never declared, but a bitter conflict ensued, not only in Vietnam but at home — on college campuses, in Congress, on city streets, and in the media, which always seemed to be there when protesters denounced U.S. involvement.

Young men who fought in Vietnam returned home without fanfare — no confetti, no ticker tape parades, no praise for their sacrifices. The homefront had been anything but supportive, and it wasn't until 1979 that the idea of a Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington was conceived by Jan Scruggs, who had served as an infantry corporal in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970.

One of the returning veterans was John Devitt, who had served in the army in Vietnam from September 1967 until April 1969. He wasn't particularly impressed with what he had read about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial scheduled to be dedicated in 1982, as he had heard mostly negative things about it. The designer, Maya Ying Lin, was not even a veteran. In fact, she was an Asian-American who had never been to Vietnam and was only fifteen years old when the last Americans left Saigon. She had won the memorial design competition in spite of her inexperience and background.

Devitt was unemployed and feeling very much alone when his family and friends got together and bought him an airplane ticket to Washington to attend the dedication of the memorial. Devitt went to Washington, but he didn't expect to like the memorial. The fact that it was black, that it was set in the ground, and that it hadn't been designed by a veteran all contributed to his negative feeling. That was until he walked up to it and was jolted by its impact. He felt a tremendous swell of pride, followed by shock, on seeing the names of 58,132 dead and missing comrades engraved in black granite.

A short time after his return to his home in San Jose, California, Devitt decided that there had to be a way for the rest of the country to experience the powerful feeling that the memorial had evoked in him. The concept of building a "Moving Wall" evolved from the discussions of a group of veterans and non-veterans who wanted to keep alive the feeling experienced at the dedication. Devitt's initial idea was to take pictures of the wall to blow up for a mural. That didn't work, so he asked for help from Scruggs, founder and president of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. Scruggs let him use copies of the negatives used to engrave the veterans' names into the original wall. Finally, the names were silk-screened onto plexiglass. Fitted into panels, the wall was set up for the first time in Tyler, Texas in October 1984.

The half-scale model of the V-shaped memorial in Washington has crisscrossed the United States, including Hawaii and Alaska, for more than three years. Devitt drives a truck and trailer from city to city to show his 250-foot-long, six-foot-high wall. To display the replica of the national

monument, groups pay its sponsor, Vietnam Combat Veterans Ltd. (VCV Ltd.), $2500 and furnish Devitt with food and lodging.

When Vietnam veteran David L. Ludwig first heard that the Moving Wall was coming to the Loyola University Campus in New Orleans, he immediately called Joan Gaulene, Director of University Relations, to volunteer his services. Ludwig, a Loyola graduate, is president of the first Crescent City chapter of Viet-now. The main objective of this national organization, headquartered in Rockford, Illinois, is to foster patriotism. He lined up representatives from other veterans' organizations to help plan the week-long program while the replica was on display.

Some of the veterans seemed skeptical at first, but soon there was plenty of input; and university staff and students, plus veteran and non-veteran volunteers, all pitched in. University staff stayed at the exhibit during the day, and the veterans maintained the vigil at night. University students read aloud the names of the veterans, and volunteers directed visitors to the locations of the veterans' names on the wall. Names were in chronological order, so volunteers had to refer to alphabetical lists to locate the names.

Wherever the wall goes, the visitors come, sometimes even before the wall is fully set up. Some visitors place flowers, wreaths, notes and photos on the wall. Nearly 50,000 people visited the replica on the Loyola campus in New Orleans, and hundreds of U.S. and Vietnamese flags were put on the wall. All of the artifacts left by relatives or friends are collected at the close of each exhibit, boxed, marked at each location, and taken to San Jose, California to be stored temporarily in the VCV Ltd. Memorial Fund's warehouse.

Joan Gaulene remembers in particular when a Vietnam veteran approached the information desk with his wife and asked directions to the name of a buddy: "When I was rotated home, he was still there, but I heard later that he was killed. Can you tell me if his name is on the wall? Can you tell me when he died?"

When he was told the date of death, he was overcome with emotion and his wife had to guide him away. Looking back over her shoulder, she mouthed, "It was his [her husband's] birthday."

David Ludwig was at the desk about 4 AM on a cold night when a misty-eyed man in a flight jacket asked for names of his comrades. He was a navy pilot still in the service, and he had come at night because he didn't want to face the crowds, not knowing how he would react.

After a while, he turned to Ludwig and said, "You know what they ought to do with that wall? They ought to put that wall in Jane Fonda's front yard!" They laughed, brushing away the tears.