

# TEACH YOUR CHILDREN

By David Rabadan

April 30, 2005, the 30th anniversary of the fall of Saigon

During the eleven months I spent in Vietnam, Crosby, Stills and Nash were at the height of their popularity. Now, when I hear their songs, it can transport me across the years to the hilltop firebase that passed for "home." One of them, "Teach Your Children," took on new meaning after I met a teacher from Raleigh, North Carolina, whose class, "Lessons of Vietnam," gives her students of today the chance to connect directly with yesterday's soldiers, their experiences, and their Memorial.

Several summers ago, Lindy Poling and I met at a summer workshop for teachers run by the United States Institute of Peace in Washington. I agreed to become one of her Vietnam veteran "links" and have now worked with five kids in a series of e-mail friendships that taught me much more about the meaning of Vietnam than I have taught them.

On April 22, Ms. Poling and students from two semesters of her class gathered at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Along with them were four other Vietnam vets, and a fifth one showed up during our session. It was a cloudy, drizzly Friday that looked like it would doom any possibility for doing the wall rubbings that are always a highlight of the visit. But the rain did not fall straight, and one wing of The Wall stayed dry enough to allow several of the kids to perform that rite that connects the living with the dead.

The clouds and drizzle did enough to bring me and the other vets back in time to Southeast Asia. Then, just as I started to speak, the unmistakable rumble of a low flying Huey helicopter electrified the scene and everyone who was there. No other school groups had arrived yet so it was a precious moment, that none of us will forget.

It happened that five of the six vets were ground combat veterans and the sixth flew B-52 missions. Two veterans who are usually the main speakers were not able to attend; Joe Galloway, the heroic teller of the story of the Battle of the Ia Drang in 1965 and Jan Scruggs, who became the moving force that conceived and pushed for building the Memorial on the Wall. Scruggs's work was self-evident; Galloway sent his regrets, and a message encouraging the students in their study of history, and their dedication to finding out more about the era of the Vietnam War and those who fought in it.

Although it fell to me to talk about the Wall and its meaning - and offer some thoughts to the captive audience before me, it was two of the other vets whose words spoke volumes. Veteran Phil Beane spoke early in the session about his combat, the loss of friends, and being wounded in combat. He was direct and forthright and testified to the always unanswered question of every combat veteran: "Why was I spared, and these others were not?"

And just before the students (all of us are students), went on their way for the day, Veteran Ric Vandett asked to speak about the meaning of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It is a place to grieve, but also to gain comfort, he said. It is a place of restoration, and most movingly he said, the Wall "absorbs our grief." For those of us who mourn our friends, and the brothers and sisters we never knew, his few sentences said it all.

Had Joe Galloway and Jan Scruggs been there, they would have known immediately just why this "black iceberg" - with its heroes identified above the surface and its stories living beneath it - is transcendent in its ability to connect generations. One of the iconic - and ironic - catch phrases of the War was - "It don't mean nothin'." This Memorial means **everything**, and that reality went back to Raleigh the next day - and it will be spread.