



# Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

## Respect, Gratitude, and Closure: A Trip of Honor and Remembrance

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### Abstract

Each year, more than 200 World War II, Korea, and Vietnam Veterans participate in the VetsRoll program, a four day bus trip from southern Wisconsin to Washington, D.C. VetsRoll is one of several organizations that bring Veterans to war memorials in Washington, D.C. to assist them in dealing with the socioemotional consequences of their time in service and return home. These programs specifically focus on older Veterans who are at a high risk for developing and/or managing mental health problems as they age. Some of these Veterans have never had the respect, gratitude, and closure necessary to help them cope with their time in service. Data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews on the VetsRoll trip in 2019 and after the trip. Data was analyzed through thematic analysis. Drawing upon the metaphor of a pilgrimage, this paper shifts the lens of analysis away from a myopic focus on memorials or peer support to how the journey itself affects Veterans, the meaning it produces for them, and the lasting impact it has after the trip.

*Keywords:* Veterans; Memorials; Pilgrimage; Mental Health

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Anthropology & Aging, Vol 43, No 1 (2022), pp. 49-57

ISSN 2374-2267(online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2022.358



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## Respect, Gratitude, and Closure: A Trip of Honor and Remembrance

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*"It is something you wouldn't want to miss being a Vet. Being on the bus with all the other guys — they're all Vets, and you've got so many kinds of things to talk about. I had a really great experience because when I got on the bus, I sat down next to a guy... we just talked all the way out there and all the way back." -VetsRoll's Vietnam Veteran*

### Introduction

As we entered Memorial Park, flowers and photographs were visible along the length of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (the Wall), and the light-hearted attitude during the bus ride gave way to a somber one. While looking at over 58,000 names on the Wall, many of the Veterans on the trip, organized by the non-profit organization VetsRoll, experienced a variety of emotions. Tears were shed as they traced the names of deceased friends with pencils and paper. One Veteran stated, "That meant something to me just finding the six guys on that Wall and some of them were my classmates." Small groups of men took pictures in front of the Wall, especially near the names of those who they once knew, and one Veteran saluted in remembrance of his deceased friends. For many, the experience of traveling to the memorial was more than a just trip, it was something deeper tied to both their past and the need for "closure and respect," which according to one participant, began with the trip providing them with "the recognition we should have gotten 50 years ago..." He continued, "Finally, somebody's giving me a pat on the back for being there and doing what we did." Visiting the memorials in Washington, D.C. was the culmination of a four-day bus ride with 220 Veterans organized by VetsRoll,<sup>1</sup> a non-profit Veterans organization located in southern Wisconsin. VetsRoll is one of several organizations that bring older Veterans to war memorials in Washington, D.C. to assist them in dealing with the socioemotional consequences of their time in service and their return home.

Aging has its challenges, especially for Veterans. In the United States, 47% of Veterans are 65 years or older, and this number is expected to increase to 52% by 2024 (O'Malley et al. 2020). All Veterans face a number of problems related to their military experiences and homecomings, especially regarding mental health issues. However, older Veterans are at an increased risk for mental health disorders such as depression compared with similarly aged non-Veterans (Williamson et al. 2018). Many older Veterans also experience war related psychological distress; however, it is not clear, whether the problems existed since their time of service or if the distress emerged due to the aging process or retirement (Hunt and Robbins 2001). Also, older Veterans may find it increasingly difficult to intentionally suppress unwanted memories because inhibitory control declines with age (Marini et al.

2020). Thus, retirement is a life event, which is potentially traumatic, because it can generate a sense of loss and loneliness which may act as a reminder of the war (Hunt and Robbins 2001).

While it is well known that Veterans suffer from combat related stress, their transitions back home have also been linked to mental health problems (Johnson et al. 1997; Riggs et al. 1998). According to Sorensen (2015), homecoming is often daunting for Veterans since they are compelled to develop a new social identity and find meaningful life in the civilian world. During this transition, Veterans frequently report feeling socially isolated and detached from society as a result of the challenges of bridging the gap between military and civilian worlds (Caddick, Phoenix, and Smith 2015). These problems are amplified when Veterans do not have a positive homecoming and experience alienation from American society because they are often misunderstood and or disrespected. This alienation acts as a secondary trauma to the primary trauma experienced during war (Watkins, Cole, and Weidemann 2010). Moreover, Boscarino et al. (2018) found that Veterans' homecoming experiences had an adverse impact on mental health even decades after deployment and suggested that supportive services to returning Veterans might result in more positive homecoming experiences.

In response, many Veterans rely on peer groups for support to help them cope with the experiences of deployment and returning home. However, according to Caddick, Phoenix, and Smith (2015), little research has explored how Veterans make sense of peer relationships in their everyday lives and how these relationships might contribute to well-being. Nevertheless, some research has shown that bonding with other Veterans can satisfy a desire for camaraderie that civilian life is unable to fulfill (2015). Military friendships are also important in helping Veterans cope with the terror, horror, sadness, and sometimes boredom of military service (Hinojosa and Hinojosa 2011). Veterans of different wars share similar experiences and therefore develop friendships and bonds. Moreover, relationships between Veterans are often fostered through Veteran support groups and nonprofit organizations; these types of organizations are based on the idea that Veterans feel more comfortable supporting and receiving support from other Veterans. It has been suggested that these organizations can be particularly useful for older Veterans because retirement may provide the time and opportunities to develop relationships with other Veterans that might not have been possible earlier in life (Marini et al. 2020).

In addition to peer support, research has shown that war memorials can be therapeutic for Veterans by providing them a sense of closure. A memorial is a symbol of the feelings of the social group (Barber 1949) and public memorials provide a free, highly visible, yet anonymous, and publicly accessible means to begin the mourning process (Watkins, Cole, and Weidemann 2010). War memorials, in particular, can signify a community's recognition of and social support for Veterans who struggle to deal with losses (Watkins 2010). Moreover, traveling to a memorial both legitimizes the feelings they elicit and reinforces the strength in those who gather together (Barber 1949). For Veterans and other visitors, war memorials can be emotionally intense spaces that promote catharsis and healing (Beckstead et al. 2011), which is why it is suggested that they be integrated into Veteran therapy programs (Watkins, Cole, and Weidemann 2010). However, many Veterans are unable or do not want to travel to war memorials that commemorate their time in service because of the emotional impact that they might have on them (Beckstead et al. 2011). Organizations such as VetsRoll seek to overcome these barriers (e.g., personal, physical, economic) to visiting memorials by providing the trip free of charge and through offering Veterans the opportunity to travel with other Veterans, which fosters friendships and provides a type of social emotional support that would not have been available otherwise.

Organizations such as VetsRoll help Veterans deal with the negative impacts of combat and their homecoming experiences by highlighting the transformative nature of the trip itself. The trip can act as a spiritual and symbolic pilgrimage for some Veterans (Michalowski and Dubisch 2001). The healing

and/or symbolic power of travel has been discussed in numerous contexts within the anthropological literature on religion (Turner 1995) and healing (Inhorn 1994). A pilgrimage can be described as the process of “going to a far place to understand a familiar place better” (Turner 1995, 218), or “travel to, and communion with, a specific non-substitutable physical site that embodies and makes manifest the religious, cultural or personal values of the individual” (Hyde and Harman 2011, 1344). Pilgrimages are more than just trips to some place, they are a type of travel that can have a powerful, even transformative, effect on its participants (Turner 1995). In their research on Veteran motorcycle clubs, Michalowski and Dubisch (2001), discussed how participants framed their journey to the war memorials as a pilgrimage to obtain closure and catharsis. Importantly, their research, illustrates that healing does not come entirely from the memorials, but from the journey that prepares individuals for the experience. They also explain how the trip is a rite of passage for many Veterans and through the journey itself, Veterans enter a liminal state, allowing for various transformations to take place such as life-healing and connection. By discussing the VetsRoll trip, this paper shifts focus away from an analysis of Veteran memorials, to instead highlight how the actual journey to these memorials can be transformative and impactful. These trips act as pilgrimages that produce multiple meanings for Veterans.

## Methods

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic project that examined Veterans’ experiences traveling on the VetsRoll May 2019 trip and their return home. The four-day trip to Washington, D.C. began and ended in southern Wisconsin in what month? The first author conducted participant observation during that time and took part in all aspects of the trip including riding on the bus, visiting the memorials in Washington, D.C., mail call, and the homecoming parade. Afterwards, all the field notes of the daily activities were transcribed from the written notes and used to develop a semi-structured interview guide.

One month after the trip ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Veterans who participated in the trip (Table 1). The participants self-reported as white with ages ranging from 71 to 99 and all but one were male. Interview participants were recruited before the trip through letters sent out to all Veterans who were signed up for VetsRoll 2019. Interested participants gave consent during the pre-trip orientation meeting and agreed to participate in an interview one month after the trip. We called them to schedule the interviews, where some took place at local libraries and some at their homes located in Illinois and Wisconsin. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts and field notes were entered into Dedoose, Version 8.3.43. Data was analyzed by the research team using the thematic analysis process that was established by Ryan & Bernard (2003). This research study was approved by University of Illinois College of Medicine in Peoria, IRB -1.

<b>Branch of Service</b>	<b>N</b>
Army	14
Army Air	1
Navy	5
Air Force	4
Naval Air	1
Women's Army Corp	1
<b>War/Conflict Served</b>	
WWII	4
Korean	6
Vietnam	16
<b>Draft</b>	
Drafted	8
Volunteered	18
<b>Active Combat</b>	
Yes	15
No	11

*Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of Veterans (n=26)*

### **From Wisconsin to Washington: A Pilgrimage**

As with any pilgrimage, participants have to believe that the destination will be meaningful and the journey transformational. Often, this begins with the development of shared expectations, meanings, and experiences as Michalowski and Dubisch (2001) note. However, some Veterans have never traveled to war memorials and have no desire to because military culture does not support the expression of appropriate emotion subsequent to combat events. Furthermore, affective responding to combat-related trauma may, for various reasons, be discouraged, ignored, or even punished (Keane, Zimering, and Caddell 1985). Moreover, those who were in combat often devalued the emotional impact that the war had on them. To this day, many Vietnam Veterans have yet to talk about their Vietnam experiences with anyone; this prohibition of discussing traumatic events both in Vietnam and upon returning home may have limited the desire to revisit war memories (1985). Therefore, some Veterans were not initially open to a trip such as VetsRoll. As one Vietnam Veteran explained, "I've got lot of friends who are Vietnam era people because of my age, and I try to convince them into going, and they said, 'Well, I'm not ready yet.' I told them, 'Well, chances are if you wait till you're ready, you're never going to go...I think that if you go, you'll be thankful that you did and there'll be some closure for you.'"

Moreover, some Veterans specifically emphasized the transformative qualities of the trip and the importance that all Veterans know that they deserve respect, honor, and remembrance. "I know so many guys and gals both that have served in the Vietnam conflict and just never got the respect or closure that they earned and should've been given," one participant explained. Others discussed how going on the trip was a way to show solidarity and support with other Veterans who had the hardest time transitioning home. One WWII Veteran exclaimed, "[The trip] was like a homecoming for the

Vietnam War people...I signed up because I felt so bad about the Vietnam guys. They didn't get a decent homecoming. They had a miserable job. I was gung-ho to go for that and I did!" The importance and potentially transformative aspect of the journey was reiterated after they signed up, during the orientation meeting, and throughout the trip materials, which stated that the purpose of the trip was "to experience respect, gratitude and closure."

The trip began on a Sunday morning, around 4:30 am as participants loaded onto their assigned buses. As we departed, family and friends waved flags and offered their well wishes to participants. The local police department escorted the buses out of town with lights and sirens, and the fire department had ladder trucks stationed along the bus route spraying water bridges over the traveling buses. The streets were lined with more than 200 American flags flying to honor each Veteran departing on the trip. As we got further out of town, there were community members and fire trucks on the interstate overpasses celebrating the Veterans by waving flags, honking horns, and blowing sirens. Marquees were lit up along the interstate stating, "Veterans thank you for your services." Looking around the bus, you could see the overwhelming emotion, and some tears, as Veterans took in the excitement and support of the community as the journey began.

We had many stops during the 4-day bus ride (e.g., restaurants, hotels, memorial sites) and they were all important components of the journey. These experiences enhanced the sense of camaraderie, catharsis, and healing among the Veterans. As Michalowski and Dubisch (2001) note, the process of healing begins as they start the journey, not just when they reach the memorials. These shared experiences strengthened the bonds among the participants and enabled them to freely talk about their military service. For many, traveling in the bus, bunking with other Veterans, and the focus on fostering relationships with other Veterans was a critical component of the trip. As one Vietnam Veteran said, "Just the camaraderie that we had on the bus and talking with the people and the guys, and heard the stories what they had to go through. It was nice."

After two days on the bus, many of the Veterans were ready to visit the memorials in Washington D.C. When we arrived, it was a beautiful morning. To set the tone of the day, the ride from the hotel to the war memorials began with a presidential escort that consisted of several police motorcycles that led the way into the National Mall and Memorial Parks while other police forces blocked traffic along the way. "Do you ever in your lifetime think that you would get a police escort to Washington, D.C. to see all the sites?" one Veteran commented. At the Vietnam Wall, one participant reflected, "Well, I think it shows that we were not all forgotten even though some of us thought that's probably what happened...It's gratitude and thanks." The experience at the Wall was a source of emotional catharsis and a sense of healing for Veterans, both Vietnam and otherwise. While there, many of the Veterans wanted to find names of friends and family listed on the Wall. Once a name was located, many had a piece of paper and pencil to trace over the names as a remembrance of their visit to the Wall. This, perhaps, is a form of a votive, symbolizing the relationship between the pilgrim and the dead (Winter 2019). This is exemplified by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's website description which states that the wall's provides visitors with the "ability to see his or her reflection at the same time as the engraved names, connecting the past and the present like few other monuments can" (Washington.org 2021). At many of the memorials, participants also left objects such as medals, letters, photos, and flowers. Such objects can have both personal and public meaning, for while they represent individual biography and individual grief, they also symbolize a collective loss and help maintain social memories of war (Michalowski and Dubisch 2001; Winter 2019).

For many dealing with the socioemotional impacts of military service, it is not about getting cured but rather learning to live with the pain. Therefore, "many people come to the Wall to be healed rather than

cured” (Michalowski and Dubisch 2001, 18) since sacred sites as such also have both inspirational and healing qualities. As one Vietnam Veteran said,

It was a relief [visiting the Wall] it was more closure, too... I wasn't the only one. I had problems in getting back and adjusting a little bit and treated so badly. They had the same responses, same thing. It felt good to talk about it. We weren't complaining about it. Those are the facts. That's what we experienced.

Echoing the emotional experience at the Wall, another Veteran commented, “Yes, that support and attention that we got from people on the trip... When I got back from Vietnam, you didn't tell anybody you were in Vietnam. You just kept your mouth shut.” This comment juxtaposes the experience of coming home from war to the cathartic experience of returning home from VetsRoll trip.

Group photos were taken at our final destination, the World War II Memorial. Many were in awe of the magnitude and beauty of it, which finally became a reality for many Veterans who had waited years for “their memorial.” One Vietnam Veteran shared, “I don't really know how to put it in words. It's just that you get to see what people actually gave up. Then you go and you see all the stars at the World War II Memorial, you don't realize how many people lost their lives there.” A Korean Veteran said, “The World War II Memorial, it's just spectacular. It's just a really moving event.” “Uh, I think every Vet that I talked to thought it was one of the best memorials there,” stated a Vietnam Veteran. The feelings of respect were amplified when several groups of schoolchildren were encouraged by their teachers to reach out to the Veterans as they visited the memorials. One Veteran described the interactions with the children, “When we stopped ... all the people and kids who came, they were saying, ‘Thank you for your service,’...they would come and shake hands.” Standing back and observing the interactions of the Veterans with the memorials and also the children demonstrated the importance of gratitude and respect at both the macro and micro levels.

On the evening before we left for home, participants were surprised when volunteers started a mail call, a time during military service when soldiers would receive mail. During the event, the founder of VetsRoll called every Veterans' name and they received a package. As the names were called, each participant proudly stood and shouted out their military serial number and stated, “yes, sir” while saluting the podium. This recreation of mail call during military service spurred many levels of emotion since the tradition of receiving mail and having connections with home had significant meaning. Some participants waited to open their mail in the privacy of their hotel room, and others waited to view their mail until they reached their own home after the trip. Reflecting on the event, one Vet said, “I thought the mail call was outstanding. That's unbelievable. I had some letters, I've read through them three or four times now from my nephews, my daughters, my wife. I mean, it's just unbelievable... brought back a lot of memories, and I was thankful.” Another Veteran shared this letter from a schoolchild during mail call,

Dear Vet, thank you for your service and sacrifice of time you made for our country... You have also protected my rights and freedom and equality. There is no possible way for me to pay back for your sacrifice... But I hope that my letter can give my gratitude and thanks for your time in the military.

As we arrived back home, the rain was pouring, but despite the rain, crowds of people lined the streets and covered overpasses of the interstate to celebrate the return of the Veterans on ten buses. An escort of over 250 Harley motorcycles led us to the conference center where we were greeted by hundreds of family, friends, and community members cheering, clapping, and waving flags as the buses pulled up.

A band playing military music was also there as participants entered the conference center looking a bit exhausted from the trip. Yet, a newfound excitement was rising as Veterans were celebrated and honored upon their return from the trip. One Veteran said, “The welcome home was unbelievable, people standing on the bridges. It was raining out, for heaven’s sake. There were little kids and adults waving at you and waving flags. I thought that was an unbelievable reception.” Others said the event was a “tearjerker” and that they “were finally shown respect.”

The homecoming events were especially important for Veterans who did not have a positive homecoming after their time in the war, especially Vietnam Veterans. While Veterans may have had a personal welcome home by friends and family, many Vietnam Veterans never felt welcomed home by their country. Having a negative or non-existent homecoming is a continuous theme within the Vietnam Veteran culture. One Veteran shared, “The homecoming parade was one of the highlights of the whole trip. To think that people would do that, and all those overpasses had fire trucks and people saluting and it just—I couldn’t help but cry when I saw that. It just was awesome.” Another said, “When I saw the kind of reception we were getting, I said, ‘Thank God the Vets, finally the Vietnam Vets, they’re finally getting their due.’” Thus, traveling with other Veterans to visit memorials, “may bind the Veterans to a larger society through powerful rituals of reintegration—most of all, by speaking the words, ‘Welcome home’” (Michalowski and Dubisch 2001, 185). This can finally provide Veterans with an “idealized return” that can help them obtain closure.

### **Reflections on Respect and Gratitude**

Travel can be a transformative experience as participants leave their everyday lives behind in search of something different. While the destination might be different, when the goal is healing (spiritual, mental, physical), the metaphor of a pilgrimage has been used to describe the experience of traveling (Pfister 2018). Each participant had his or her unique reasons and hopes for the journey, and there was a sense that traveling to the memorials with other Veterans would bring a level of catharsis. On the surface, the trip was about visiting memorials, however, throughout our research, we learned the trip was much more than that. It was about generating profound change in the participants which was made possible through what was referred to as VetsRoll’s “special pilgrimage” (Montgomery 2020). As a pilgrimage, the goals of the trip were to promote respect, gratitude, and closure through visiting memorials and building friendships. At all stages of the trip, the importance of gratitude and respect was discussed and framed as a foundational aspect of the healing experience. The trip coordinators deliberately created the trip to promote these feelings, and Veterans expressed them and used the same language to discuss the healing experience. According to Avendano (2018), upon completion of the journey, pilgrims generally experience life as significantly more meaningful, and their psychological or spiritual woe is overcome. They write, “Central to the healing power of pilgrimage is the sense of community forged by traveling together on a common mission” (2018, 106). As one Veteran explained, “One was a Korean Vet and the rest of us were all Vietnam. And we talked until quarter after two in the morning about Vietnam, about family, we cried together, we laughed together, we hugged together, we shook hands, it was just a very, very, very emotional closure is where it really was.” This comment illustrated that the VetsRoll trip fostered a meaningful sense of gratitude and respect to help facilitate closure for the Veterans.

For many, the VetsRoll journey was an unforgettable and life-altering trip. However, gratitude extends beyond the Veterans being thankful and includes the gratitude expressed to the Veterans for their time in service through the mail call, the homecoming parade, and other symbolic gestures. According to Kavedžija (2020), an “attitude of gratitude” (59) in older adults lends meaning to life, a diffuse sense of thankfulness for various forms of care and support that one has received from others over the course of



life; “attitude of gratitude” encompasses the reflection on the past with attention to the present in its fullness and, Kavedžija continues, “opens up a space for a particular kind of hope that is grounded in the moment” (68). Overall, gratitude for older adults is a way of capturing the present, rather than dwelling in the past or leaping toward the future (2020). As one Vietnam Veteran explained, “The entire trip was such a blessing. I’m glad that I had the opportunity to go... It’s not only touching the lives of us guys and gals that go, but when we came home, I think we’re different people too, and it helps us to look at situations and people in a different light.” As Veterans age, they are at an increased risk for developing mental health problems as a result of never fully dealing with the emotional and physical impact from their time in service. Their problems can especially be amplified if they had a negative homecoming or have not been able to get support from Veterans organizations. However, this research suggests that through the transformative process of traveling with other Veterans to war memorials, older Veterans can obtain some of the gratitude and respect that they were denied during their homecoming and begin the process of healing.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Mark Finnegan, the VetsRoll Board of Directors, volunteers, and participants for their support of the project. Funding was received for this project from The June E. Dilling Fund and The Stateline Nurses Network. The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

## Notes

1. To find out more information about VetsRoll visit [www.VetsRoll.org](http://www.VetsRoll.org)

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