The Legacy of the Vietnam War

- Book Excerpt, page 217
- Letter, page 220
- Timeline, page 222

What’s the Connection?

In “Zebra” you read about a veteran of the Vietnam War. In the following selections, you will learn more about the war and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Skill Focus: Summarize

Have you ever seen a news report about something, such as digital music, and then read about that topic in a book? Even though they were on the same subject, it is likely that the news report and the book each had a different main idea, the most important thing that a writer wants you to know about a topic.

As you read the book excerpt and the letter, you will identify the main ideas and the supporting details, which are examples or facts that help you understand the main ideas. After finishing these selections, write a summary of each of them, a brief retelling in your own words. Use a chart like the one shown to record the information and write each summary. Follow these steps:

- Break down the selections into parts, such as paragraphs or sections.
- Jot down the main idea and supporting details in each part. Think about the overall meaning—the writer’s message.
- For the summary, write a topic sentence explaining the overall meaning of the text. Then provide the most significant details.

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<th>Part 1 Main Idea</th>
<th>Part 2 Main Idea</th>
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My Summary: Overall Meaning + Significant Details
The outpouring of messages and mementos left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is unique; no other national memorial has evoked such a response. On special days the tokens of love and remembrance are many, on rainy or snowy days perhaps only a few, but I have never been to the memorial when there were none.

I am sometimes puzzled by the mementos left, sometimes deeply touched, always reminded that behind the names on the memorial there were and are mothers, fathers, wives, children, grand-children, friends, and sweethearts who still love and miss those who did not return from Vietnam.

What is the meaning of a tattered dollar bill beneath panel 24E? An empty red glass beneath panel 14W? A can of sardines, a teddy bear, Tinker Toys, a soccer ball beneath other panels? Only the person who brought the remembrance can know what it means to him or her and what it would have meant to a special name on the wall.
Notes and letters left at the memorial are different. You understand, at least in part, the emotion behind them. And I remember a card left at the wall by a woman whose husband’s name was on one of the black granite panels. She had put the card there on what would have been their silver wedding anniversary—twenty-five years. It reminded me of how long the Vietnam War had been over—and of how long the important memories are part of our lives.

I long ago decided it was all right to read the messages left at the memorial. They are expressions of private grief and love, but I think that the people who leave them do not mind sharing their thoughts and feelings with others; perhaps they want to share them.

More than 55,000 remembrances of all kinds have been left at the wall since it was dedicated, and that number does not include tens of thousands of flowers, wreaths, and other floral arrangements. Organic material is not saved, but National Park Service rangers collect all other items left at the memorial. The remembrances are gathered up at the end of each day and sent to a warehouse known as...
the Museum Resource Center. At the center every item collected gets a bar code and is placed in a plastic bag.

David Guynes, former director of the center, once said to me: “There are so many questions, so many mysteries, in these memorabilia. So many stories are in them, so much feeling, emotion, heartache. What can be learned about America and Americans from these things they have brought? Altogether, these materials make up a very important part of the story of the Vietnam War. This is the material of social history.”

Duery Felton, curator of the National Vietnam Veterans Collection at the Museum Resource Center, told me that the number of memorabilia and messages being left at the wall is increasing on special days. During one three-day period in 1997—Memorial Day, the day before, and the day after—park rangers collected 2,300 items that had been left at the wall.

And yet, in a certain sense, each of the thousands of things left at the memorial is unique. The reason, of course, is that the person who left it and the person whose name is on the wall had a relationship that was theirs alone.

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This black beret (left) and Purple Heart (right), along with the other items shown were all left at the wall.

SUMMARIZE
Reread lines 54–70. Identify a phrase or sentence that gives the main idea of the section. Then do the same with lines 71–84.
Dear Bill,

Today is February 13, 1984. I came to this black wall again to see and touch your name, and as I do I wonder if anyone ever stops to realize that next to your name, on this black wall, is your mother’s heart. A heart broken 15 years ago today, when you lost your life in Vietnam.

And as I look at your name, William R. Stocks, I think of how many, many times I used to wonder how scared and homesick you must have been in that strange country called Vietnam. And if and how it might have changed you, for you were the most happy-go-lucky kid in the world, hardly ever sad or unhappy. And until the day I die, I will see you as you laughed at me, even when I was very mad at you, and the next thing I knew, we were laughing together.

But on this past New Year’s Day, I had my answer. I talked by phone to a friend of yours from Michigan, who spent your last Christmas and the last four months of your life with you. Jim told me how you died, for he was there and saw the helicopter crash. He told me how you had flown your quota and had not been scheduled to fly that day. How the regular pilot was unable to fly and had been replaced by someone with less experience. How they did not know the exact cause of the crash. . . .

He told me how, after a while over there, instead of a yellow streak, the men got a mean streak down their backs.
Each day the streak got bigger and the men became meaner. Everyone but you, Bill. He said how you stayed the same, happy-go-lucky guy that you were when you arrived in Vietnam. How your warmth and friendliness drew the 30 guys to you. How your lieutenant gave you the nickname of “Spanky,” and soon your group, Jim included, were all known as “Spanky’s gang.” How when you died it made it so much harder on them for you were their moral support. And he said how you of all people should never have been the one to die. 

How it hurts to write this. But I must face it and then put it to rest. I know after Jim talked to me, he must have relived it all over again and suffered so. Before I hung up the phone I told Jim I loved him. Loved him for just being your 40 close friend, and for being there with you when you died. How lucky you were to have him for a friend, and how lucky he was to have had you. . . .

They tell me the letters I write to you and leave here at this memorial are waking others up to the fact that there is still much pain left, after all these years, from the Vietnam War. 

But this I know. I would rather have had you for 21 years, and all the pain that goes with losing you, than never to have had you at all.

Mom
**Timeline: U.S. Involvement in Vietnam**

The seeds of the Vietnam War were planted in 1858 when France attacked Vietnam for control of the government. After decades of frustration under foreign rule, many Vietnamese began supporting the Communist movement against the French. Meanwhile, the United States struggled against the spread of communism worldwide.

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<td><strong>1968</strong> U.S. citizens begin to think the war cannot be won.</td>
<td><strong>1968</strong> The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam reaches its peak. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong launch the Tet offensive, a series of surprise attacks.</td>
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<td><strong>1970</strong> Four students are killed at an antiwar demonstration in Ohio.</td>
<td><strong>1973</strong> All U.S. troops leave Vietnam.</td>
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<td><strong>1975</strong> The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is dedicated in Washington, D.C.</td>
<td><strong>1975</strong> South Vietnam surrenders to the Communists. The U.S. Embassy in Vietnam is evacuated.</td>
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<td><strong>1982</strong> The Vietnamese government begins economic restructuring.</td>
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After Reading

Comprehension

1. **Recall** When did the last U.S. combat troops leave Vietnam?

2. **Clarify** What kind of person was Bill Stocks?

3. **Clarify** In general, how would you describe the remembrances people leave at the Wall?

Critical Analysis

4. **Analyze** In the book excerpt, the objects left along the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial are described as “expressions of private grief and love.” Why do you think the writer lists specific examples?

5. **Identify Main Idea** Think about the main idea of Eleanor Wimbish’s letter. Describe this main idea to a friend or relative.

Read for Information: Evaluate a Summary

**WRITING PROMPT**

Write a one-paragraph evaluation of a classmate’s summary of the letter.

Exchange your summary of the letter with a classmate’s. Read it carefully. Then review it as you check “Yes” or “No” to answer the checklist questions. Finally, write your one-paragraph evaluation, basing it on your checklist responses.

- Is the summary presented in a clear, well-organized manner?
- Is the summary brief?
- Does the summary touch upon the main ideas and supporting details of the selection?
- Does the summary convey the overall meaning of the selection?