

## Memorial Service

Many years have quickly passed,  
Not all of them were kind,  
The dreams I thought would never last,  
Still burning in my mind.

I thought that I would grow and change,  
Remove my guilt and fear,  
But all attempts were in vain,  
The ghosts are always near.

A sound, a smell, a single word,  
Can take me back again,  
A place that seems a world away,  
Is just around the bend.

These words (part of a poem I am still trying to identify the name and author of) speak to a journey most of us have made since returning from Vietnam. The words speak to a journey of emotions: fear, regret, anticipation, hope, and loss. The words speak to our feelings for those we left behind in Vietnam, and those who have left us since returning home. Each of the individuals we are memorializing today left far too soon and are missed dearly.

Today, we honor those who have honored us. They honored us by giving themselves, totally and completely, to give each of us the opportunity to enjoy full and complete lives. They honored us by serving as examples of bravery and sacrifice. While they viewed themselves as ordinary men, they were far from ordinary. They didn't want to die...I am sure of that. But they did what they were asked to do, without hesitation, without reservation, without consideration of the consequences for themselves.

We gather here today, taking pleasure in the pride that springs from shared experience. Sharing our memories of those brave men, while never, ever allowing them to be forgotten, is part of the ongoing tribute we pay. For many of us, those individuals remain an important part of our daily lives. As the poem reminds us:

A sound, a smell, a single word,  
Can take me back again,  
A place that seems a world away,  
Is just around the bend.

When our memories take us back, these men are there...they are part of what pulls us back in time. However, I know after giving their lives, they want each of us to find the peace we deserve. They want us to remember them and to grieve their loss, but would not want us to suffer because of it.

During the Vietnam Conflict, over 58,000 brave young Americans gave their lives in service to our country. In addition to those who died in-country, we must remember those that came home in body, but not in mind or in spirit – they returned home carrying the hidden emotional scars of Vietnam. Those brave soldiers, more than 100,000 of them, returned home only to take their own lives. For all practical purposes, they were killed in the jungles and rice patties of Vietnam...they just didn't fall there. How many more than the 100,000 who committed suicide still carry the pain of Vietnam with them today, but have stopped short of taking their own lives? We don't even know.

And there is another group of veterans who deserve our acknowledgement...those are the ones who returned with the scars of exposure to Agent Orange. I am reminded of the words from the song about exposure to Agent Orange sung by Country Joe McDonald:

*"But I got the news this morning, yeah, the doctors told me so.*

*They killed me in Vietnam, and I didn't even know."*

The number of veterans and their families who can personally relate to those words number in the hundreds of thousands. Many of the men we have lost since returning home have died premature deaths as a result of carrying the fertile seeds of Agent Orange. They returned home after their tour of duty, believing they were among the lucky ones, only to learn later in life they were also a causality of war. They may not have died "in-country", but they are casualties of Vietnam just the same. Today, as we pay tribute to those who gave their lives in Vietnam, we must also pay tribute to all those individuals who have fallen since returning home as a result of the emotional and medical wounds they received.

I believe the largest toll extracted by the Vietnam War was levied against the families of those that served. The pain of losing a son, or a brother, or a husband in a controversial war on foreign soil must be unbelievably difficult to accept – especially when that loved-one is so young and has his entire life before him. A pain just as over-whelming has to be losing a loved-one who was unable to cope with the emotional scars they carried and resorted to taking his own life. And the pain accruing to families of those who have suffered premature deaths resulting from exposure to Agent Orange has to be just as great. There are always the questions to be answered, "Why him? Why us? Why now?" Of course we don't

have the answers to those questions, but what we can express is our sympathy to those families for the pain, and the suffering, and the losses they have incurred. God bless them all.

As we remember our casualties, each of those that died in-country and each of those we have lost since returning home, let us bow our heads for a moment of silence.

Thank you.