

2013 Memorial Service
589th Engineer Battalion Association – Vietnam

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts and feelings regarding those we lost in Vietnam. To have the opportunity to stand before you, a group of individuals who have shared so much, is truly an honor.

There is something special about a memorial service. Until I experienced Vietnam, I personally did not understand – I didn't understand the importance of a memorial service, the significance of paying tribute, giving recognition, honoring and expressing admiration. Thinking about it now, I realize that before Vietnam I had never lost a friend, or seen others die, for whom I had so much respect. Respect, not simply for the person, but for what those individuals stood for, the selflessness for which they sacrificed themselves, their commitment to fellow soldiers, and the honor they bestowed on 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 did not want to die...But they did what they were asked to do, without hesitation, without reservation, without consideration of the consequences for themselves.

For most of us, this reunion, and especially this memorial ceremony, is a coping mechanism, a cleansing of stressful memories of a stressful time. As I write this, the phrase "a cleansing of stressful memories of a stressful time" causes me to pause. Were those really stressful times? Yah, those were stressful times – I don't know anyone who thought otherwise. Are our memories stressful? Sure, some of them are, although I also remember some good times. What made those times stressful? Easy, none of us wanted to die in Vietnam. However, some did die – not everyone returned. Therefore, how do we find peace with that fact – how do we cleanse ourselves of the guilt knowing we returned while others did not?

I believe that is our purpose now, at this service. This memorial service is not something we carve time out for during the reunion, it is the purpose for coming together. I am proud to say this service for our 589th casualties is special – this becomes a time when those we lost are not simply part of our memories, they are what we remember, who we focus on, who we pay tribute to. The reading of their names, the ringing of the Bell, the sounding of taps each contributes to the honor we pay those individuals.

However, my remarks today are going to extend beyond those we lost in Vietnam, to each of those who have died since returning home. While those we lost in Vietnam share a special place in our hearts and deserve special recognition, there is another group who also deserve our acknowledgement ...those are the ones who returned home bearing the scars of exposure to Agent Orange. We each know them –

they are standing next to you this afternoon. Their list is long; they include many of our brothers who died before their time. Some of them died before the birth of the 589th Association, before they were able to attend a reunion. Others have died between reunions – each year there are several. At least a couple were not able to attend this reunion due to their illness – and even more of us will not be able to attend next year. Our diminishing numbers have to give us pause.

As I think about our Brothers who have passed before us, the words from the song about Agent Orange sung by Joe McDonald sounds in my head.

“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 who served with the 589th Engineer Battalion in Vietnam and their families, who can personally relate to those words, number in the hundreds. Many of the men we have lost since returning home have died premature deaths from 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 because of the emotional and medical wounds they received.

Another group of individuals that deserve special recognition for the sacrifice they endured is the Gold Star Families. Until I had an opportunity to meet and visit with folks like Norm Goldman’s family, I truly didn’t have an appreciation for what each of our families, and particularly those who lost family members in Vietnam, went through. Although we personally suffered from the loss of our casualties, the grief experienced by their families had to be tremendous. My message today for those Gold Star families is that your loved-ones didn’t die alone, and certainly haven’t been forgotten. Just as they have remained in your hearts and in your memory over the years, so have they remained in ours. After all, they were our brothers too.

As we gather during the reunion, it is easy to sense the pride that springs from shared experience. During this memorial ceremony, there is pleasure in honoring the memories of those who are no longer with us. Sharing our memories of those brave men, while never 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. Personally, I think of them often – not only those I knew, but those I didn’t have the opportunity to meet - they march through my memory on a regular basis – sometimes more frequently than I want. The thought

of them revives those “old feelings”. Feelings of being young and innocent, of lives full of promise and hope, of being grateful for surviving our personal time in hell. We were sheep dressed-up in wolf’s clothing, cocky and proud, fooling everyone but ourselves. If you listen closely, there's an echo in the wind that makes us wonder where we've been; all the years we left behind, faded pictures in our minds.

As we think about those we lost in Vietnam, those that are still suffering from the effects of their time there, and the families of those we lost, let us bow our heads for a moment of silence.