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2014 Memorial Service
589th Engineer Battalion Association – Vietnam
Presented by: Bob Spencer

There is something special about a memorial service. One of my most significant memorial services occurred 5 years ago – in 2009 - during our first annual 589th Association Reunion. Many of you were there. We gathered at the City Park in Waynesville, near Ft. Leonard Wood – huddled under one of the protective canopies scattered throughout the park. That particular Saturday was one of those beautiful fall days that made you appreciate being alive. The sun was dancing in and out of the clouds, offering warmth to the day that made it special. Since it was our first reunion, we were feeling our way through a program that provided some guidance, but little detail.

I was probably as nervous about what I was experiencing as the next person. We came to the reunion not knowing what to expect, or how we would feel after we arrived. After all, it had been 40 years since most of us had seen or heard from each other. I remember questioning myself as to how others would remember me, if at all. Serving in Vietnam was a big influence on my life, so I knew the Reunion would trigger feelings I had managed to hide for many years. I remember thinking that if those repressed emotions got too difficult to deal with; I could simply disappear for a while. I remember those concerns being especially strong over my ability to handle the Memorial Service.

As the time for the Memorial Service neared, I found myself getting very nervous about what was to come. Perry asked Larry Jenkins of C Company to share his thoughts, which he did beautifully. During Larry's comments, he led us through a very emotional experience – his comments were from the heart, and much to my surprise he shared some of the same emotions I was feeling. Today, I don't remember every word Larry had to say, but I do remember exactly how I felt as he spoke. His remarks were the frosting on our reunion cake. Larry's remarks were the ingredient that allowed each of us to reunite with our lost Brothers. Those remarks helped me realize that connecting with, and paying tribute to, the brothers we have lost is just as important as reconnecting with those who are able to attend in person.

Each year since that first reunion, this Memorial Service has become a more significant and meaningful portion of the reunion event. The service has grown in ways that evidence just how much our lost brothers mean to those of us fortunate enough to be present today. The driving force behind that effort is our enduring desire not to allow our casualties to be forgotten.

In regards to remembering and paying tribute to our fallen brothers, I have contemplated the question, "At what point does a person cease to exist?" Certainly, at death we cease to exist in the physical world. However, I would also argue that our lives continue much longer than that. I believe as long as our fallen brothers are remembered, as long as their contribution continues to make a difference in the lives of others, as long as they continue to be an influence, as long as we continue to celebrate their lives and the differences they made in ours, they will continue to hold a place on this earth. Our fallen brothers may not be with us today in body, but they are with us today in spirit - they certainly have not been forgotten. Instead, each of them will live on as long as we are here to remember – as long as we reserve a special place in our memories and celebrate their contribution to our lives, freedom and the American way of life.

All of us made a contribution in our own way while in Vietnam, and our individual contributions certainly allowed the 589th Engineers to make a tremendous difference in the war effort. We can each be very proud of that. While many made a "contribution", only a few made a "sacrifice". I view contributions as being short term, while sacrifices last forever. As the years pass, we are learning that many veterans were making sacrifices in Vietnam they didn't realize they were making – what they were giving while in Vietnam was going to last their lifetimes. While their physical injuries healed on the outside, they carried home with them both mental and emotional injuries, as well as the seeds of illness caused by exposure to Agent Orange.

We want to pay tribute to those whose sacrifice lasted their lifetime – those whose lives will be, and have been, cut short because of their service in Vietnam. Some of those are not able to be with us today. Some have health problems carried over from Vietnam. Some are experiencing emotional problems – they haven't emotionally healed to where they can be a part of this gathering. Financially – the war influenced some in ways that never allowed them to prosper financially. We want to acknowledge those who have suffered emotionally and have experienced the fate of alcoholism, poor relationships, and the inability to integrate into mainstream society. We must remember the homeless - those living on the streets; those veterans standing in line at soup kitchens waiting for their next meal; those veterans who have never been able to hold a job. We hear about those veterans on the news every day and think they belong to some other war, some other unit, are someone else's brothers. That is not the case. They are our brothers – some served with us in Vietnam; some served with the 589th and attached units; we knew them, we shared the Vietnam experience with them, we depended on them and they depended on us. The celebration for

the sacrifice our casualties made, the sacrifice many of our deceased brothers made since returning home, and the sacrifice many of you still make as you live from day-to-day, must remain the pinnacle of our reunion experience.

Last year, after the Memorial Service, one of our members approached me and asked, "Bob, why didn't anyone warn me the memorial service was going to be so emotional?" Last year was he and his wife's first reunion. As I pondered his questions, I thought back to that first reunion in 2009 and how I felt as I listened to those carefully selected words Larry Jenkins shared with us, as we huddled under the canopy in the city park at Waynesville. I remember the tears in my eyes as the memories and feelings returned. I remembered all the emotions: sorrow for those we lost; regret for everything we experienced; sadness for their families; appreciation for their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice so the rest of us could seek the American Dream; and the big one, guilt, because I was there and they were not – I had been able to live a complete life, while theirs was cut short. This individual was embarrassed by the tears and emotions the memorial service stirred within him. But he shouldn't have been. Shedding tears during a memorial service, as you remember and pay tribute to those who mean so much, is completely natural – even for a veteran...or I should say especially for a veteran. Veterans have a special feeling and a special place for the memories of those who have gone before us. We know they didn't want to die, but they did what their country asked them to do. They died not to let the rest of us down.

Memorial services can open a window to our souls that we don't often allow others to look into. That window, and the memories behind it, is insight we are reluctant to share; after all, real men don't share their emotions, especially with those closest to us. Many of us, if not most, have carefully harbored those feelings and kept the memories and emotions connected with our lost Brothers hidden. We often ask, "What good does it do to bring their memories up, it only makes me sad? However, I respond that the sadness we feel is not only a tribute to those we lost, but sadness is an important part of the healing process so important to us and those around us. Feeling sad is OK. Letting others know how you feel is good. In spite of everything, the feelings we carry from the loss of our brothers will last a life-time.

Our mothers may have given us life, but our fallen brothers have made everything else in life possible. After all, what is the value of life without freedom? Or the value of life without opportunity? Or the value of life without self-determination? Those are the values our brothers died for – those are the values you served for - that is your legacy.

So, as the names of our casualties are called out during this service, I will shed tears: tears of sorrow, tears of regret and sadness, and tears from the guilt I carry. However, most of my tears will

express my appreciation - appreciation for their gift to the American way of life; for their bravery and courage; and appreciation for the example they set for the rest of us to follow. The ringing of Bell will send shivers down my spine as I think about what a privilege it is to honor each of them as individuals. At the conclusion of the program, the playing of taps will have my heart pounding as I think about how honored each of our fallen must feel as we lay them to rest one more time. However, I will not be embarrassed by those emotions, or that my tears may be visible to others. After all, these men died for our quality of life – shedding a tear is simply a sincere way of saying thanks for their sacrifice.

Death, by any other means than a natural cause, is a tragedy - that is especially true for casualties of war. The casualties that occurred in Vietnam remain very near to each of us – they were our friends, our family...they were truly our brothers. Our casualties were our brothers when their lives were taken, they are our brothers today, and they will remain our lost brothers forever.

I ask that we all bow our heads for a moment of silence.

Thank you,