

VIETNAM VETERANS

WHILE I THANK EACH VETERAN FOR HIS OR HER SERVICE IN WHATEVER WAR OR PEACETIME THEY SERVED IN, I DO SEEM TO THANK VIETNAM VETERANS MORE MAYBE BECAUSE I AM ONE. BUT I'M ALSO PROUD OF THOSE THAT SUPPORTED US THERE AS NON-COMBATANTS LIKE OUR DONUT DOLLIES BARBARA LILLY, MY FRIEND SUSAN MCLEAN AND THE OTHER 605 THAT SERVED WITH THEM.

BUT IT'S YOU VIETNAM VETERANS THAT I'M GOING TO TALK ABOUT THIS MORNING. I'M GOING TO TALK ABOUT A TIME - LONG AGO - BUT NOT REALLY THAT FAR AWAY IN MOST OF OUR MINDS AND DAILY THOUGHTS. AND WHILE I'M SPEAKING ABOUT A SPECIFIC GROUP OF VETERANS SOME IT WILL PERTAIN TO ALL VETERANS.

I DON'T KNOW HOW EACH OF YOU FEEL ABOUT YOUR SERVICE... SO I'LL SPEAK SOMEWHAT IN GENERALITIES AND YOU CAN APPLY WHAT FITS.

FIRST... I'M GOING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING THAT I HOPE YOU HAVE HEARD BEFORE BUT IF NOT IT'S ABOUT TIME. LET ME TELL YOU THAT YOU HAVE NOTHING TO BE ASHAMED OF FOR SERVING YOUR COUNTRY IN THAT HELL HOLE KNOWN AS VIETNAM.

YOU DIDN'T GO TO VIETNAM TO SAVE THOSE LITTLE FOLKS FROM THE BIG, BAD COMMUNIST THUGS. YOU WENT THERE BECAUSE YOU WERE ORDERED THERE. AND ONCE THERE, YOU DID YOUR JOB AND YOU DID IT WELL!

WHEN YOU'RE REMINDED IN SOME WAY OF THOSE TIMES IN VIETNAM AND YOUR SERVICE THERE, BY A CERTAIN SMELL; OR, A SOUND; OR, BY A SONG OF THAT ERA; OR, WHATEVER IT IS THAT BRINGS YOU BACK TO THOSE TIMES, I HOPE THEY'RE NOT ALL BAD MEMORIES. I KNOW YOUR MEMORIES ARE ALL DIFFERENT. FOR SOME OF YOU, THEY'RE NOT SO GOOD. FOR OTHERS IT'S ABOUT THE COURAGE AND THE SACRIFICES YOU SAW ON THE BATTLEFIELD. IT'S ABOUT THOSE YOU SERVED WITH.

ONCE YOU WERE THERE AND HAVING SERVED YOUR CHERRY TIME THEN WORKING YOUR WAY INTO THEIR RANKS, IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR YOU TO REALIZE THAT YOU WERE ALL BROTHERS!

YOU WERE YOUNG AND NOT REALLY THAT WELL TRAINED. YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT OR WHAT WAS REALLY GOING ON. YOU WERE IN A WAR THAT FEW UNDERSTOOD, MOSTLY BY OUR LEADERS. BUT YOU FOUGHT HARD AND WON EVERY SINGLE MAJOR BATTLE THAT YOU WERE ASKED TO.

I KNOW THAT IT WAS SOMETIMES HARD TO UNDERSTAND HOW YOU MADE SUCH SACRIFICES LIKE TAKING THAT HILL ON ONE DAY ONLY TO LEAVE IT THE NEXT DAY AND GIVE IT BACK TO YOUR ENEMY; TO CLEAR A ZONE FOR THE FARMERS TO HARVEST THEIR RICE ONLY TO HAVE THE VC COME IN AT NIGHT AND TAKE IT FROM THEM ANYWAY. SOME OF YOU HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF SERVING AMONG THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE AND SEEING THEM WANTING TO BE ABLE TO LIVE IN FREEDOM JUST AS WE DO. THAT MAY HAVE INFLUENCED YOU IN SOME WAYS. BUT I THINK IT'S THAT BROTHERHOOD THAT PROBABLY INFLUENCES YOU THE MOST.

AND WHEN YOU CAME HOME, I DON'T KNOW IF ANYONE EVER CALLED YOU NAMES AND SPIT ON YOU OR NOT. I HOPE NOT. BUT SOME WERE! JEERED INSTEAD OF CHEERED! BUT THAT SHAME ISN'T YOURS. IT IS ON THOSE THAT PROTESTED. NOT ON YOU!

YOU HAVE NOTHING TO BE ASHAMED OF. YOU DID YOUR JOB! PRESIDENT NIXON SAID, AND I QUOTE - "NO EVENT IN AMERICAN HISTORY IS MORE MISUNDERSTOOD THAN THE VIETNAM WAR. IT WAS MISREPORTED THEN, AND IS MISREMEMBERED NOW. RARELY HAVE SO MANY PEOPLE BEEN SO WRONG ABOUT SO MUCH. NEVER HAVE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR MISUNDERSTANDING BEEN SO TRAGIC." – END QUOTE. THE SAD TRAGEDY OF THAT ERA IS THOSE THAT FELL INTO THAT TRAP.

BUT YOU CAN WALK AWAY FROM IT ALL WITH HONOR. YOU WENT THERE BECAUSE YOU WERE ORDERED THERE, AND ONCE THERE, YOU DID YOUR JOB AND AGAIN, YOU DID IT WELL.

AFTERWARDS, IT WAS EASY TO FALL INTO THE TRAP OF THINKING IT WAS ALL A WASTE. YOU CAN QUESTION THE CIRCUMSTANCES. YOU CAN CONDEMN THE WAR. YOU CAN EVEN CONDEMN THE POLITICIANS, THE PROTESTORS AND EVEN THE MEDIA. BUT NEVER, EVER, DISHONOR YOUR FELLOW WARRIOR FOR DOING HIS JOB BY YOUR FEELINGS OF GUILT! DON'T LET THOSE THAT DIED ON THOSE BATTLEFIELDS EVER BE DISHONORED BY ANY GUILT YOU MAY FEEL!

SO, YOU CAN STOP ASKING THAT QUESTION OF WHY YOU MADE IT BACK AND HE DIDN'T! HE WAS A GOOD GUY! WHY HIM AND NOT ME? WHY DID I MAKE IT HOME AND HE DIDN'T?

I'LL TELL YOU WHY. I'LL TELL YOU WHY YOU MADE IT BACK. YOU MADE IT BACK TO HONOR HIM! YOU MADE IT BACK TO MAKE SURE THAT HE, OR THEY, WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN! YOU MADE IT BACK TO MAKE DAMN SURE THEIR NAME IS MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER SPACE ON THAT BLACK WALL. HONOR THEM! REMEMBER THEIR NAME! REMEMBER THEIR LAUGH! NEVER, EVER, LET THEIR NAMES BE FORGOTTEN! REMEMBER THEM WITH HONOR! THAT'S YOUR JOB. AND IF THAT'S A JOB YOU DIDN'T ACCEPT WHEN YOU CAME HOME, YOUR NEW JOB STARTS TODAY! THAT'S WHY YOU MADE IT BACK! HONOR THEM!

YOU MADE IT BACK TO HONOR THAT BROTHERHOOD THAT'S FORMED ONLY ON A BATTLEFIELD. THAT BROTHERHOOD IS SOMETHING THAT NO ONE CAN EVER TAKE AWAY FROM YOU - THAT BOND THAT'S SEARED INTO YOUR SOULS. THAT'S SOMETHING NO PROTESTER COULD EVER HAVE TAKEN AWAY FROM YOU. IT'S NOT ABOUT THE POLITICS OF WAR. IT'S ABOUT YOUR BROTHER IN ARMS. IT'S ABOUT THAT BOND THAT NOTHING BUT BATTLE CAN CREATE.

IT'S NOT ABOUT BEING IN SOME FOREIGN LAND FIGHTING FOR A PEOPLE THAT YOU DIDN'T EVEN UNDERSTAND. IT'S ABOUT THAT BROTHER ON YOUR LEFT OR RIGHT FLANK. IT'S THOSE YOU FOUGHT WITH! IT'S THOSE YOU FOUGHT FOR. IT'S THOSE THAT YOU WERE EVEN WILLING TO DIE FOR. AND YOU KNOW THAT! BE PROUD THAT YOU ANSWERED THE CALL AND GAVE IT YOUR BEST. NEVER APOLOGIZE FOR ANYTHING YOU DID DURING OR AFTER THAT WAR! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO APOLOGIZE FOR!

LET ME TELL YOU WHY ELSE YOU MADE IT HOME! AFTER BUILDING THE MOST POWERFUL MILITARY FORCE THIS WORLD HAS EVER SEEN, YOU CAME HOME TO BUILD AN ECONOMY THAT SURPASSED ANY BEFORE. YOU MADE THIS A BETTER COUNTRY. THAT'S WHAT YOU DID!

YOU EVEN WON THE COLD WAR.

HAVE YOU EVER EVEN WONDERED WHY THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE RUNNING AROUND OUT THERE... PRETENDING TO BE VIETNAM VETERANS? I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER RUN INTO ANYONE PRETENDING TO BE ONE OF THE PROTESTERS OF THAT ERA.

WHY DO OUR CURRENT SOLDIERS THANK YOU FOR SHOWING THEM THE WAY? BECAUSE THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT YOU DID! THAT'S WHY!

NO ONE CAN STEAL YOUR VALOR! IT'S YOURS! YOU OWN IT! YOUR MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON, DC IS THE MOST VISITED WAR MEMORIAL IN THIS COUNTRY! THAT IS YOUR HONOR!

AND YOU KNOW SOMETHING ELSE, YOU DID NOT LOSE THAT WAR! THE PROTESTORS AND THE POLITICIANS MAY HAVE LOST THAT WAR BY GIVING UP TOO SOON. BUT, YOU DIDN'T! IT HAS BEEN FALSELY REPORTED THAT GENERAL VO NGUYEN GIAP, COMMANDER OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMIES, MAY HAVE SAID WHEN HE WAS CONSIDERING HIS MEMOIRS THAT IF THAT WAR HAD LASTED ANOTHER SIX MONTHS THEY WOULD HAVE HAD TO SURRENDER. THAT REPORT MAY BE FALSE, BUT THE REALITY OF IT COULD HAVE BEEN TRUE. THINK ABOUT IT. YOU WON EVERY SINGLE MAJOR BATTLE. YOU CONTROLLED THE SOUTH. WITH CONTINUED VICTORIES LIKE THOSE AND THE BOMBINGS OF THE HO CHI MIHN TRAIL, HANOI AND HAI PHONG, THEY WOULD HAVE HAD TO SURRENDER IF OUR POLITICIANS HAD NOT GIVEN UP TOO SOON. YOU WON THAT WAR!

NINETY ONE PERCENT OF YOU SAY THEY ARE GLAD YOU SERVED! SEVENTY FOUR PERCENT OF YOU SAY YOU WOULD DO IT AGAIN - EVEN KNOWING THE OUTCOME. YOU WERE NOT THE DRUGGED OUT CULTURE THAT YOU WERE PRESENTED TO BE BACK THEN. NINETY SEVEN PERCENT OF YOU WERE DISCHARGED UNDER HONORABLE CONDITIONS. EIGHTY FIVE PERCENT OF YOU MADE A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION BACK INTO CIVILIAN LIFE AND EVEN FORMED SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES! YOU BECAME DOCTORS AND NURSES. YOU BECAME PREACHERS AND TEACHERS AND PROFESSORS. AND FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO DID, THANK YOU FOR BEING THERE TO TELL THOSE YOUNG STUDENTS THE TRUTH ABOUT WHAT YOU DID. YOUR INCOME EXCEEDED THAT OF NON-VIETNAM VETERANS OF THE SAME ERA BY MORE THAN EIGHTEEN PERCENT.

YOU MAY HAVE CONFUSING EMOTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU DID, BUT THERE IS ONE THING THAT YOU SHOULD NEVER FORGET, THAT'S THE BROTHERHOOD OF HAVING BEEN THERE AND DONE THAT! OF WALKING THE WALK SO OTHERS COULD TALK THE TALK! STAND TALL! BE PROUD OF BEING A VIETNAM VETERAN. YOU EARNED IT! THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE! AND WELCOME HOME BROTHERS!