

EDITORIAL

Most living veterans today are Vietnam veterans. The Arizona legislature has designated March 29 as Vietnam Veterans' Day. The Department of Defense announced its program to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War to thank and honor veterans of the Vietnam War for their service and sacrifice on behalf of the United States. The following is a speech I gave over a decade ago which may be relevant to present circumstances.

SPEECH TO 5TH U.S. CAVALRY ASSOCIATION REUNION-PHOENIX-MAY 20, 2000

by: Joseph E. Abodeely, Colonel, USA (Ret.)

Long, long ago, in a land far, far away, many of us here tonight served our country and risked our lives, our limbs, our psyches, to help people in what used to be South Vietnam from being overrun by Communist aggression. We answered the call of President John F. Kennedy who said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country".

We went to war--a war unlike the U.S. had ever fought before--no well defined fronts, no consistent rules of engagement or free fire zones, no easily identifiable enemy, no terrain to hold to show victory, no true measure of success in the conduct of the war except the flawed "body count" reports. We even let the enemy know we would not cross countries borders to pursue him or try to ultimately destroy his home base of operations--Hanoi and the rest of North Vietnam-- so as not to irritate Communist China or the Soviet Union.

We went to war under the aforementioned conditions; and we did it during the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, and when the media was against not only the war, but us. It was in vogue to be anti-war, anti-government, anti-military, pro-Ho Chi Minh, and yes, pro-the North Vietnamese Communists. And we, and our brothers, were fighting and dying in Vietnam while engaged in, what I still believe, today, was a noble cause. We did our duty. "Duty"--it sounds like some archaic word. We fought with valor and honor. Two more archaic words. Those words don't seem to mean much to people today, except they mean a great deal to us. We know things about duty, valor, honor, that others will never know.

I served as an infantry platoon leader with the 7th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry division during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Those of us who had the privilege of serving with the 1st Air Cav know we made the airmobile concept famous and an integral part of military operations today. We know the 1st Air Cav in Vietnam had the most casualties of any division--about 5,000. It was the most lethal unit in Vietnam because of its firepower and helicopters. It was the first full division to deploy to Vietnam, and some of its soldiers were the last to leave. It had the most awards of the Medal of Honor, and it was the only division to receive a Presidential Unit Citation.

If I may say so, the 1st Cav was also the division which relieved the 6000 marines who were under siege for 78 days at Khe Sanh. I'm biased, but I believe that the 1st Air Cavalry Division was simply the best unit ever deployed for combat. And those of you who served in it should be very proud.

We know how efficient we were in Vietnam, but President Nixon got caught up in Watergate; the Democratic Congress wanted to embarrass him; so they cut funding for troops in Vietnam. Nixon wanted "peace with honor". His enemies thought it was alright to use us as political pawns. The media made it look like we were run out of Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army when, in fact, we were ordered to leave in 1973. The NVA invaded Saigon in 1975, two years after we left.

The bra-burners, the civil rights marchers, the democratic Congress, the anti-war protestors, and the media did not care about us because they all had their own agendas. Many of our brethren found it difficult to adjust after returning "back to the world", but the vast majority of us conquered our demons and became productive members of society.

David Hackworth, a retired Army colonel and one of the most decorated soldiers during the Vietnam War, now a nationally syndicated columnist, wrote in the Arizona Republic, May 4, 2000:

"...For the grunts, Vietnam was one of America's toughest infantry fights. In their father's war, few ground-pounders clocked the frontline combat days like the Vietnam vets. The U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division, which fought from Africa to Czechoslovakia, had the record for more combat grunt time than any other U.S. foot-slogging outfit in World War II. Total line days: about 350. The average Viet grunt clocked 365 line days, unless he went out early by litter or body bag. In their dad's war, there were tidy fronts, reserve time, breathing space between invasions. In Vietnam, there was no reserve time, no fronts, no rest time, just the endless pounding over some of the worst terrain our infantry has ever slogged through. Every unit was fully committed..."

Hackworth also commented how proficient the Viet Cong and the NVA were as fighters and users of the ever present booby traps and mines.

A local opinion writer for the Arizona Republic, Robert Robb, wrote on May 3, 2000 how twenty-five years ago, when he was a sophomore in college, he recalled walking into his dorm to see "... the spectacle of upperclassmen gathered around the television, cheering the communist takeover" of South Vietnam. He further pointed out that the youthful radicals of the '60s and early '70s who are now middle aged seem to want to whitewash the anti-war movement and make it look responsible, noble, and even patriotic dissent. I believe that the media for decades has already done that.

Robb commented on how as early as 1965 the leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the vanguard of the anti-war movement, called the American system corrupt and that American withdrawal from Vietnam would result in a communist victory. America was supposedly imperialistic, evil, and racist. Those were the times, and America let the communists take over South Vietnam.

So what did those communists whom the anti-war protestors were cheering for do after they took over South Vietnam? They sent hundreds of thousands of people to so-called "re-education camps" where they were often tortured or murdered. A million others were uprooted from their homes, cities, and villages and forced to live elsewhere. A million and a half people fled their "liberation" by the communists. Do you remember the boat people and those college upperclassmen, Jane Fonda, the SDS, and other anti-war protestors who cheered the communists and defamed and spit on us?

But we know we were right. We see that 25 years after the communists took over South Vietnam, the country is in shambles. It has an economy that produces a per capita income of only \$350 a year. We did the right thing to try to prevent the communist takeover of the south. We did our duty, with valor, and honor. And we are better people today for it. It doesn't matter if

others are too ashamed to say they were wrong and we were right. We know. And others are learning. They are learning that those of us who fought for freedom for South Vietnam—the way we had to fight the war and the way we were betrayed by the government, the media, and much of the populace—that we were the best of the best of what our country stands for. Be proud.

WELCOME HOME!

Joseph E. Abodeely, Colonel, USA (Ret.)