

Good morning, Mayor Dunleavy, Teaneck council members and distinguished guests. I would like to thank Dean Kazinci and all those responsible for organizing today's activities and for allowing me this opportunity to speak. I want to offer a salute to the Teaneck Police Department, Fire Department and EMS workers.

I would like to recognize my wife Marge, who has stood beside me for over 52 years, my son Chris Robins with Teaneck FD, and grandson James.

I especially want to thank all of you for being here to help pay tribute to all the outstanding men and women who have served our country on this Veterans Day. It is up to us to ensure that every veteran feels that his or her service to this country is appreciated by their fellow Americans. There are many tangible ways that we can acknowledge their sacrifice, but the easiest is to simply say, "Thank you for what you have done for our country."

Ronald Reagan once remarked: When we honor those who died in defense of our country, in defense

of us, in wars far away. The imagination plays a trick, we see these soldiers in our mind as old, wise, solemn, and gray-haired. But most of them were boys when they died, and they gave up two lives -- the one they were living and the one they would have lived. When they died, they gave up their chance to be husbands and fathers and grandfathers. They gave up their chance to be revered, old men. They gave up everything for our country, for us. And all we can do is remember.

If you are a Veteran, please raise your hand and be recognized.

By way of introduction, please allow me to tell you something about myself. I graduated from High School in 1964. After two years of additional schooling, I joined the Army, arriving in Vietnam at the ripe old age of 19.

I was assigned to the 1st Air Cavalry Division in Vietnam and served as a helicopter crew chief. A book and movie were made about my unit. When I

read the prologue of the book “We Were Soldiers Once and Young” I found that almost every word and sentence related to how I felt about my Vietnam experience, some of my remarks are reflected from the prologue of the book.

This story is about time and memories. The time was 1965, a different kind of year, a watershed year when one era was ending in America, and another was beginning. We felt it then, in the many ways our lives changed so suddenly, so dramatically, and looking back on it from a half-century gone, we are left in no doubt. It was the year America decided to directly intervene in the affairs of obscure and distant South Vietnam. It was the year we went to war. In the broad, traditional sense, that "we" who went to war was all of us, all Americans, though in truth at that time, the larger majority had little knowledge, less interest, and no great concern with what was beginning so far away.

So this story is about the smaller, more tightly focused "we" of that sentence, the first American

combat troops who boarded World War II-era troopships, sailed or flew to that little known place and fought the first major battles of a conflict that would drag on for ten long years and come as near to destroying America as it did to destroy Vietnam. In the beginning, the Vietnam War was a dress rehearsal where new tactics, techniques, and weapons were tested, perfected, and validated. In the beginning, both sides claimed victory, and both sides drew lessons, some of them dangerously deceptive, which echoed and resonated throughout the decade of bloody fighting and bitter sacrifice that was to come.

This is about what we did, what we saw, what we suffered in South Vietnam when we were young and confident and patriotic, and our countrymen knew little and cared less about our sacrifices.

Another war story, you say? Not exactly, for on the more important levels, this is a love story, told in our own words and by our own actions. We were the children of the 1950s, and we went where we were sent because we loved our country. Many were

draftees and many had joined, but we were proud of the opportunity to serve that country just as our fathers had served in World War II and our older brothers in Korea. The unit that I was a member of, was an experimental combat division trained in the new art of airmobile warfare at the behest of President John F. Kennedy. We went to war because our country asked us to go, because our new President, Lyndon B. Johnson, ordered us to go, but more importantly because we saw it as our duty to go. That is one kind of love.

Another and far more transcendent love came to us unbidden on the battlefields as it does on every battlefield in every war man has ever fought. We discovered in that depressing, hellish place where death was our constant companion that we loved each other. We killed for each other, we died for each other and we wept for each other. And in time we came to love each other as brothers. In battle, our world shrank to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around. We held each other's lives in our hands and we learned to share our

fears, our hopes, our dreams as readily as we shared what little else good came our way.

We were the children of the 1950s and John F. Kennedy's young stalwarts of the early 1960s. He told the world that Americans would go anywhere, pay any price, bear any burden in the defense of freedom. We were the down payment on that costly contract, but the man who signed it was not there when we fulfilled his promise. John F. Kennedy waited for us on a sloping hill in Arlington National Cemetery, and in time, by the thousands, we came to fill those slopes with our own white marble markers and to ask on the murmur of the wind if that was truly the future he had envisioned for us.

Among us were old veterans, grizzled sergeants who had fought in Europe and the Pacific in World War II and had survived the frozen hell of the Chosin Reservoir in Korea, There were Regular Army enlistees, young men from America's small towns whose fathers told them they would learn discipline and become real men in the Army. But regardless of

how we got there, we were 19- and 20-year-old boys summoned from all across America to fight.

Leading us were the sons of West Point and the young ROTC lieutenants from Rutgers and The Citadel and, yes, even Yale University who had heard Kennedy's call and answered it. There were also the young enlisted men and NCO's who passed through Officer Candidate School and emerged, newly minted, officers and gentlemen. All laughed nervously when confronted with the cold statistics that measured a second lieutenant's combat life expectancy in minutes and seconds, not hours.

We had left an America that was to disappear forever in the smoke that billowed off the jungle battlegrounds where we fought and bled. The country which sent us off to war was not there to welcome us home. It no longer existed. We answered the call of one President who was now dead; followed the orders of another who would be hounded from office, and haunted, by the war he mismanaged so badly. Many of our countrymen came to hate the war we fought. Those who hated it the most---the

professionally sensitive---were not, in the end,
sensitive enough to differentiate between the war and
the soldiers who had been ordered to fight it. They
hated us as well as the war.

In time our battles were forgotten, our sacrifices
discounted and both our sanity and our suitability for
life in polite progressive American society were
publicly questioned.

Many of us, myself included, rebuilt our lives, found
jobs or professions, married, raised families, and
waited patiently for America to come to its senses. As
the years passed we searched each other out and found
that the half-remembered pride of service was shared
by those who had shared everything else with us. With
them, and only with them, could we talk about what
had really happened over there---what we had seen,
what we had done, what we had survived.

We knew what Vietnam had been like, and how we
looked and acted and talked and smelled. No one in
America did. Hollywood got it wrong every damned
time, whetting twisted political knives on the bones of
our dead brothers.

So this is what it was really like, what it meant to us and what we meant to each other. It was no movie. When it was over the dead did not get up and dust themselves off and walk away. The wounded did not wash away the red and go on with life unhurt. Those who were, miraculously, unscratched were by no means untouched. Not one of us left Vietnam the same young man he was when he arrived.

This story, then, is my testament, and tribute to over 58,000 Americans who died beside us during those years and whose names are etched on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and on our hearts. This is also the story of the suffering of families whose lives were forever shattered by the death of a father, a son, a husband, a brother in that land.

As I stated at the beginning of my remarks, this is a story of memories and time, not offered in comparison to the memories of veterans of other eras, but rather in tribute to the similarities of the experiences of all veterans. As I think back over these years since I returned from Southeast Asia, I

have become more appreciative of the commonalities I share with my brothers and sisters in arms who preceded me in combat as well as those who have followed after me. I'm also aware of the demands placed on the family members of the men and women who serve our nation. I salute all of you who have maintained your support and faith in us. I thank you for this opportunity to express these feelings and thoughts, I am honored to say that I am proud to be a Veteran, Thank you.