

## **Viet Nam War Memorial Traveling Wall**

### **Closing Ceremony (Yreka, CA)**

**Colonel Jon E. Lopey (USA – Retired)**

**March 30, 2014**

Good afternoon to our distinguished guests, public officials, servicemen and women, veterans, family members and friends. I would like to especially say “Welcome Home” to all Viet Nam Era veterans on this special day, which marks “Welcome Home Viet Nam Veterans’ Day!” It is truly a privilege and an honor to be with you today, wearing the uniform of the United States Army, which represents the honor, traditions and service of the Armed Forces of our great nation and those who have served since our Nation’s inception. Your presence means so much on this great occasion because your presence, as a veteran, family member, friend or currently-serving military member pays tribute to those who serve or have served this great nation in the active Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard or active or inactive Reserve or National Guard. Although it is impossible to pay adequate homage and tribute to our heroes in uniform, especially our Viet Nam veterans during a 10 minute speech, I will give it a try.

First, freedom isn’t free. What we have in the greatest nation ever is due to those who have been willing to serve in our military during peacetime and war. Father Dennis Edward O’Brian, a Marine Corps Chaplain said it all:

"It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press.  
It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech.  
It is the soldier, not the organizer, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate.  
It is the soldier, who salutes the flag, who serves beneath the flag,  
and whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protestor to burn the flag."

The first time I heard about Viet Nam was when I found out a Marine recruiter I befriended in Reno, Nevada (I started badgering him when I was 11 years-old – I still have the letter, sticker, and picture of the flag raising at Iwo Jima that he was kind enough to send me when I told him I wanted to be a Marine) advised my family that he received order to report to Viet Nam. I sent him a letter and at the time, my mother worked for the Air Force at Travis Air Force Base and she got me his address somehow. The letter returned several weeks later with the familiar red stamp with a check marked “Deceased.” I was devastated and it started what would later be my long-term associated with the Viet Nam Era.

I joined the United States Marine Corps 42 years ago this year. I wanted to serve in Viet Nam. I wanted to serve like my father and my uncles did in World War II and later, the Korean War. I wanted to be a Marine. I didn’t care what people said about the war, I wanted to serve. I never did that much for my country. I served nearly 38 years, active and reserve, in the Marines and Army, and I still think I haven’t done that much. I could never repay the brave men and women who fought to keep us free in past wars. Many of you will agree with me when I say that the only true heroes are the brave men and women whose names are etched on the “Wall” behind me. But in reality, all Viet Nam veterans and those willing to serve during that era are heroes to me and those of our generation. In my opinion, those who served during this time were the best of their generation, much like their fathers and grandfathers who fought in World War II and Korea. All Viet Nam Era veterans are, in my opinion, better, braver, and more selfless than the vast majority of the men and women who did not serve during this time, which was over 90% of the adult population.

These truly immortal heroes of the Viet Nam Era are the men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice and to them our debt is owed – A debt to 58,272 brave souls. Each name on the “Wall” represents infinitely so much more than a name but each name represents a personal story, hopes, dreams, aspirations, loves, achievement, and a legacy of patriotism, valor, and service. Each name also represents a precious incalculable loss to thousands of families, towns, communities, team-mates, and places like Siskiyou County, California. Each name represents the loss of and the forfeiture of a “National Treasure” and what could

have been and what could have been achieved by these brave men and women had they survived the war.

When I think of Viet Nam and as I reflect on my military service, I don't consider my military accomplishments to be particularly noteworthy; however, I was always proud to serve – THEN AND NOW. In retrospect, I owe every medal, ribbon, badge, promotion, award, accolade, and achievement I ever received to the great leaders who mentored me, guided me, and supported me throughout my career – the enlisted, noncommissioned officers and commissioned officers I served with.

I remember my primary drill instructor, Sergeant Jerrolds. He served two tours in Viet Nam as a “grunt” or infantryman. Although drill instructors at that time used what could be considered barbaric methods then, such as slaps, punches, and an occasional chocking technique, I revered all of my drill instructors and firmly believe they taught me not only how to be a Marine but how to survive on the modern battlefield. We trained for Viet Nam. I would carry the lessons they taught me for nearly 38 years of active and reserve service. I remember Staff Sergeant Miller, our senior drill instructor. He too was a Viet Nam veteran who taught me what I needed to know to be a better Marine. My other drill instructor, Staff Sergeant Reese, an African American, taught me that the only color in the Marine Corps was “green.” Later, I ran into him at Camp Pendleton after my overseas tour when I was a young sergeant, and he was kind enough to invite me into his home and I had dinner with him, his wife and small child.

I remember my first assignment to the famous 3rd Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines. The unit was recently back from Viet Nam and was a skeleton of its former self. My company commander, First Lieutenant Decker, still had to go to the hospital from time to time to extract shrapnel still wedged in his body. I remember First Sergeant Chagnon, a Korean and Viet Nam War veteran who led without ever raising his voice but commanded utmost respect from all the men that he led. I remember my immediate supervisor, Sergeant JC Taylor. As a private, he earned the Silver Star at Khe Sanh and had other medals, including the two Purple Hearts.

He once accused another Marine of being a “rookie” because he only had one Purple Heart.

I volunteered for overseas duty but the only opening was in Alaska and the Philippines. I chose the Philippines, where an uncle was killed during World War II. Like many service members serving in Southeast Asia during this period, I was immediately struck by many new sights, sounds, and smells I wasn't accustomed to. I remember stepping off the plane at Clark Air Force Base and my first thought was that I felt like I had stepped into an oven it was so hot. I wondered if I could stand such heat for my one year tour.

I remember the strange and pungent odors, like open sewers in ditches, strange smells from outdoor cooking stands. I remember the army of bugs like mosquitos and cockroaches that seemed to be everywhere. I remember the dirt, mud, and the monsoons that brought torrential downpours of rain in buckets that I had never seen before. I remember the relentless heat and humidity – It was like living in a sauna at times. I remember the jungles, thick and nearly impenetrable. I remember the fear of various reptiles like the sea snake prevalent in the South China Sea and land snakes like the deadly Bamboo Viper, King Cobra, and Python.

I learned how to survive in the jungle at jungle survival school. My Negrito instructor was from a tribe that was headhunters until the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He was a good instructor. He fought the Japanese during World War II as a guerilla. I remember the poverty, despair, and even depravity of the poor and the hope and support America provided to our foreign counterparts. I also realize how great the United States of America really was and after a few weeks abroad, I learned how much I loved and missed my country and family. Our command guarded the Subic Bay Naval Base, which, provided support to the many warships in the region and we provided ordinance to the aviation assets still flying combat missions in Viet Nam during a time of “Vietnamization” which was essentially a plan to turn over all fighting in South Viet Nam to its military forces.

When I went overseas to Marine Barracks, Subic Bay, Philippines, I had a company commander named Captain Charles Lowder, a veteran of First Recon in Viet Nam; he had two Silver Stars, 2 Bronze Stars, Three Purple Hearts, jump wings and a

scuba bubble. First Sergeant Hafer was a Korean and Viet Nam Veteran. He once saved me from getting an Article 15 when I didn't sign-off from liberty. Sergeant Major Solomon Kaiona was a Korean and Viet Nam War Veteran, who could rival any recruiting poster Marine in bearing, professionalism, and demeanor.

My Marine Barracks commanding officer, Colonel Ed Snelling, wore a Navy Cross from the Chosin Reservoir Campaign earned during the Korean War and he wore every other decoration the Marine Corps could bestow on a warrior – everything except the Medal of Honor. Even though I knew our nation was being torn apart over the war, I was honored to serve the Corps and I had great leaders and great men to serve with and look up to. While in the Philippines, a Navy lieutenant and friend (Seabee Lieutenant Charles H. Jeffries, CEC, USN, OIC "Wallaby Detachment") was ambushed by unidentified terrorists on our base perimeter along with two other senior Naval officers. It was my second experience regarding the loss of someone I greatly admired serving in the military. I remember the USO shows we had on occasion.

I really appreciated the performers traveling overseas to entertain us even though the war wasn't that popular. To this day, I love the late Bob Hope, Joey Heatherton, and Ann Margaret for always being there for the troops and I admire other entertainers for what they did too.

Our Barracks XO, Lieutenant Colonel Harold Huston, was a fighter pilot who earned an Air Medal and Purple Heart in Viet Nam. Our own Major General Jake Vermilyea knew and served with LTCOL Huston. There were many other heroes with whom I served during my tour in the Marine Corps. They were great men. They were heroes. They were the Viet Nam veterans we all looked up to. Later, while attending Marine Officer Candidates' School, my Platoon Leader, Captain Martello, a great leader and mentor, used to tell us about life as a young second lieutenant in Viet Nam, where he earned a Bronze Star with "Combat V" and a Purple Heart. He told us aspiring Marines to listen and learn from your NCOs and wisely advised us not to take ourselves or our rank too seriously. When I later became an Army second lieutenant and platoon leader, my first platoon sergeant was Staff Sergeant Isaiah Johnson. He was a great leader and mentor. He walked

with a distinct limp because half of his hip was shot-off in Viet Nam while serving as an infantryman with the Army's Big Red One (First Division). We didn't have computers then. The most I could contact home was a 10 minute phone call once a month if I was lucky. Mail took at least two weeks. I avoided drinking and smoking but I remember cigarettes were 20 cents a pack and a case of San Miguel Beer was a less than a couple U.S. dollars. A Victory Liner trip to Manila, about 90 miles, cost 70 cents. A Jeepney ride in town cost 15 centavos. A private in those days previously made less than \$90.00 a month but when I joined the Marines, President Nixon got us a whopping raise, significantly increasing our monthly salary to \$288.00. Our drill instructors continuously reminded us that we did not deserve this much money because we didn't work hard enough to earn it! Later, as a corporal overseas, I was rolling in the dough and cleared \$200.00 every two weeks.

I also remember how different I was when I got out of the Marine Corps and started college with the GI Bill. I didn't really fit in with a lot of my former friends and they didn't seem to understand the military, the war, or why we served. That is probably why I soon went back into the service as a Marine Office Candidate and later, in the reserves. I don't remember many thank you's when I got home. When staying for a while at home my younger sister wasn't too impressed with my sergeant stripes and I almost reenlisted my first week home. I remember the comments at the airports – some good and some bad. I remember the Hare Krishna's who often picked out a young serviceman to harass while waiting for a flight.

I remember the hippies and the time Jane Fonda protested at the front gate at Travis Air Force Base, where my mother worked for the Air Force. I remember I felt so alienated when I got out of the Corps that I didn't get a haircut for a whole year and generally, didn't talk a lot about being in the service. I remember when I made sergeant and I wore my Marine Corps green dress uniform home. I was proud of my uniform but it is different now – how you are treated. Now servicemen and women receive applause and thank you's – then we typically only received stares, an occasional pat on the back from a WW II veteran, but more often than not, an accusation like "baby killer" or "war monger" from men and

women, most of whom wore strange clothes like bell bottoms, tie-died t-shirts, sandals, and most of the guys and girls wore pony tails and many wore headbands and custom beads. Nearly all of my high school friends verbalized the same media depictions of the war, which generally reflected negative developments like the court martial of Army Lieutenant William Calley of My Lai Massacre fame and I vividly remember the protests taking place in many major American cities. I always resented the fact that most movies about Viet Nam didn't extol the bravery, fidelity, and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform during this time and most movies seem to paint a more sinister and gloomy picture of our fighting men and women and our Viet Nam Veterans. These movies, unlike the patriotic pictures made during the World War II and post war periods, did not comport to the observations and experiences that I had with the warriors I had served with while in the Marine Corps. Sure, we had some big challenges during the Viet Nam Era but these problems were dealt with by our leaders. I didn't see one movie about Viet Nam that adequately reflected the quality and honorable service I saw from the Marines with whom I was privileged to serve with during my time in the Corps.

A former Marine officer, Karl Marlantes, a Navy Cross recipient and author of the best-selling novel, "Matterhorn," a book about Marines in Viet Nam, said, "When the peace treaty is signed, the war isn't over for the veterans, or the family. It's just starting." That is true for most Viet Nam Era servicemen and women. Marlantes also said, "The Marine Corps taught us how to kill, but it didn't teach me how to deal with killing."

Marlantes also said an interesting thing about war and our society: "War is society's dirty work, usually done by kids cleaning up failures perpetrated by adults." Many of the bravest and best served at the whim of our political leaders of the time. About 2.7 to 3.4 million Americans served in Viet Nam and over 9 million served in the military during the Viet Nam Era (9.7% of their generation). There are 7.6 million Viet Nam Era veterans still alive and they comprise 35% of all living veterans. Some reports indicate that less than 805,000 Viet Nam veterans who actually served in-country are alive today. Indeed, our veterans, including the brave and resolute Viet Nam survivors have always made a difference for our

great nation and our allies. Martin Luther King once said, "If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live." In Viet Nam, 58,272 men and women were killed and 304,704 wounded – that is about 10% of the force. Peak troop strength during the war was 543,482.

61% of the men killed in Viet Nam were 21 years-old or younger. 11,465 of those killed were younger than 20 years-old. 17,539 of those killed were married. The average age of the men on the "Wall" is 23 years. One young man killed in Viet Nam was 15 and five killed were 16 years-old. The oldest casualty was 62. The highest numbers killed were from California. The highest casualty rate was from West Virginia (84.1 per 100,000 vs. the average of 58.9 per 100,000 population). Of the well over 304,000 wounded, 75,000 were severely disabled, 23,214 were 100% disabled, 5,283 lost limbs, and 1,081 sustained multiple amputations. In Viet Nam, amputations or crippling wounds to lower extremities were 400% higher than in World War II and 70% higher than Korea. Viet Nam had 766 POWs and as of January 2004, there were 1,875 Americans still listed as unaccounted for in the war. It is worthy of remembrance that at least 19 names on this sacred Wall are sons from Siskiyou County. Many men here today shed blood in Viet Nam, including some of the volunteers working today – Men like Viet Nam hero Tony Ginocchio.

Contrary to popular belief, only about 25% of the forces in Viet Nam were draftees compared to 66% of United States service members drafted during World War II. It is amazing but a little known fact that in Viet Nam, the vast majority of servicemen and women were actually volunteers. Viet Nam service members were more educated than their World War II or Korean counterparts (79% were high school graduates compared to 45% and 63% for WW II and Korea). It is a tribute to the Viet Nam Era veteran that they were more willing to serve than the World War II's "Greatest Generation." Viet Nam was one of the toughest wars we ever had to fight, especially on the ground, where the typical warrior was nearly always too hot, too wet, too hungry, too thirsty, and seldom comfortable for any appreciable amount of time.



Some other interesting facts associated with this “Sacred Wall” include some of the following: There are three sets of fathers and sons on the Wall; the largest age group is 18 years-old (33,103); 997 warriors were killed on their first day in Viet Nam; 31 sets of brothers are on the Wall; Thirty-one sets of parents lost two of their sons; one high school in Philadelphia (Thomas Edison High School) lost 54 servicemen in the war; 244 warriors were awarded the Medal of Honor during the Viet Nam War (153 of them are on the Wall); On July 4, 1966, nine graduates of Morenci High School in Arizona, team mates on the school’s football and basketball teams, joined the U.S. Marines. Only three returned home. The most costly day in Viet Nam was January 31, 1968, when 245 deaths were sustained. The most costly month was May 1968, when 2,415 casualties were sustained, forever immortalized by “THE WALL.”

Viet Nam veterans are much less likely to be in prison than their non-veteran counterparts and most made successful transitions to civilian life, are better educated, earn more money, and are generally more successful than their non-veteran peers. 91% of Viet Nam veterans are proud of their service and 97% of Viet Nam veterans received honorable discharges. 74% of Viet Nam veterans say they would serve again – no matter what the outcome. Nearly 90% of the United States population holds Viet Nam veterans in high esteem.

Viet Nam veterans fought for a good cause, but regardless of what you believe about the war, they did their duty and much, much more! One Vietnamese communist slogan read, “Better kill ten innocent people than let one enemy escape!” From 1957 to 1973, the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong and NVA) assassinated 36,725 Vietnamese and abducted another 58,499. The death squads sent by the communists focused on village leaders, elders, medical personnel, social workers, and school teachers and administrators.

Truly, the gallant men and women of the Viet Nam Era and veterans of all wars are representative of the “true value” of our armed forces and the valor our servicemen and women have exhibited on battlefields or training grounds since the beginning of our nation. Veterans exemplify the duty, honor and service, which make the United States of America special. Calvin Coolidge once said, “The

nation which forgets its defenders will be itself forgotten.” We have the opportunity today to reflect on our Viet Nam Era military veterans and the price they and their families have paid for our freedom and the hardships we have avoided because of their courage, commitment, sacrifice, and eternal vigilance.

What is the debt to our servicemen and women, especially those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom in Viet Nam? Overseas, and stateside, I have continuously witnessed the intelligence, courage, determination, skill, loyalty, unwavering commitment and heroism of our fine servicemen and women time and time again. Supporting our Viet Nam veterans and all servicemen and women is a debt we owe them. We may be closing the “Wall” down today but don’t let the purpose of what this “Wall” represents die in your hearts, minds, and souls.

Never, never, ever forget what this “Wall” stands for – For Siskiyou County, for our citizens here, for our Viet Nam veterans, for their families, friends, and fellow veterans and to a grateful Nation. Marine Corps General Ray Davis, a World War II, Korea and Viet Nam veteran and recipient of the Navy Cross and Medal of Honor once said, “We have come to more fully appreciate the one common golden thread which runs through all our war experiences: their gallantry in combat, their compassions for the victims of war, their support of families and communities at home, and their constant patriotism and loyalty. They (veterans) are a major force for good – a national treasure for America.” You, our Viet Nam veterans and families are indeed a NATIONAL TREASURE!

We are indeed indebted to every Viet Nam Era veteran and their family members and other loved-ones and it is up to us to ensure that their courage and sacrifices and the men and women represented on this wall are not forgotten. This solemn obligation also means remembering that not all casualties of the Viet Nam War are etched on the Wall but are manifested in many ways in many of our veterans and their family members to this day. We have to remember that many Viet Nam veterans were casualties after the war in a variety of ways! As a Viet Nam Era veteran and fellow citizen I urge you to REMEMBER TO REMEMBER THEM! REMEMBER THOSE WHO LOVE AND SUPPORT THEM AND REMEMBER WHAT

THEY HAVE DONE FOR US AND WHAT THEY DID FOR THE VIETNAMESE PEOPLE! REMEMBER THEM AND ALL VETERANS AND CURRENTLY SERVING SERVICE MEMBERS EVERY DAY. REMEMBER THAT A NEW GENERATION OF WARRIORS INSPIRED BY THE BRAVE AND RESOLUTE VIET NAM ERA VETERAN SERVES US EACH AND EVERY DAY IN HARM'S WAY OVERSEAS IN PLACES LIKE THE HORN OF AFRICA AND AFGHANISTAN. REMEMBRANCE AND RESPECT - THAT IS THE LEAST WE CAN DO FOR THEM. AGAIN – NEVER ALLOW SERVICEMEN OR WOMEN TO BE FORGOTTEN OR DISRESPECTED BY ANYONE. DO NOT DO WHAT WE DID TO OUR VIET NAM VETERANS. INDEED, THEIR VALOR WAS STOLEN FROM THEM EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE ENTITLED TO IT JUST AS MUCH IF NOT MORE THAN ANY GENERATION IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards.” Indeed, our veterans deserve a square deal and all the honor, respect, admiration, gratitude and homage we can bestow upon them and their families. Every Viet Nam Era veteran deserves our utmost respect because they:

1. *The Viet Nam Warrior honored the United States of America, our flag and the Constitution.*
2. *The Viet Nam Warrior fought and died to keep us free and they protected the oppressed in a foreign land. Many Vietnamese sought and achieved freedom because of you.*
3. *The Viet Nam Warrior sacrificed for this country and made this world safer and a better place for all free people.*
4. *Viet Nam Warriors set a selfless example of service, patriotism and valor for all to follow.*
5. *Viet Nam Warriors were brave and served when others faltered and avoided service.*
6. *Viet Nam Warriors helped to ignite and renew the beacon of light for the lost and oppressed in Viet Nam and other places around the world.*

7. *Viet Nam Warriors and their families shouldered the burden of physical, mental, and emotional wounds of combat.*
8. *The Viet Nam Warrior were and continue to be the glue which binds our nation's foundation and they have helped us to heal the wounds of that Era.*
9. *Viet Nam Warriors showed us as Americans what genuine integrity, duty, honor, strength, fidelity, valor and what the definition of a celebrity or "hero" should really be in this nation!*
10. *Viet Nam Warriors and their families are the very best our nation has to offer.*
11. *The Viet Nam veteran taught America, whose people were slow to realize, that we must always honor our servicemen and women and must never, never forget to say, "THANK YOU" for what they did to keep us and others free!*
12. *The Viet Nam veteran taught Americans how veterans and our servicemen and women in the modern era fighting overseas should be treated!*

Plato once said, "Only the dead will see the end of war." Let us hope and pray that peace comes quickly to our nation. But the lessons of history dictate that Plato is probably right. I thank God that we have always had a military that has kept us safe and veterans who have provided the heart, soul, muscle, and sinew which has always made our nation great. Ronald Reagan once said, "Above all, we must realize that no arsenal, or no weapon in the arsenals of the world, is as formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries in today's world do not have."

The moral courage of the free men and women of our military – our veterans and our military, and their families stand on that line between war and peace and protection versus destruction. You, our Viet Nam veterans, have always stood for honor, duty, country and service. As long as we have you men and women to look up to, to honor, to emulate, we as a people will always have hope for a better tomorrow. You have helped to light the path in a sometimes dark world.

Because of you and those like you, there will always be freedom, security, hope and justice for us all.

Thank you for taking the time to be here today to honor Viet Nam veterans and the achievement, courage, perseverance, and sacrifices they and their families have made for our great nation. God bless you. God Bless our servicemen and women, all veterans, their families, patriotic supporters and, GOD BLESS AMERICA!

WELCOME HOME VIET NAM VETERANS! THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE TO THE GREATEST NATION ON EARTH! THANK YOU FOR A JOB WELL DONE!