

50th High School Reunion Talk – Lewis A. Ruff, Jr.
9/16/2018

I WAS ASKED TO SAY SOMETHING ABOUT THE WAR IN VIETNAM & THE LACK OF RECOGNITION THAT MANY VETERANS EXPERIENCED ABOUT RETURNING FROM THE WAR.

WE GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL AT A CRITICAL TURNING POINT IN THE NATIONAL DEBATE ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR.

IN 1965, THE GALLUP POLL BEGAN ASKING THE QUESTION: “IN VIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS SINCE WE ENTERED THE FIGHTING IN VIETNAM, DO YOU THINK THE U.S. MADE A MISTAKE SENDING TROOPS TO FIGHT IN VIETNAM?”

IN AUGUST OF 1965 61% SAID NO TO THAT QUESTION WHICH MEANT A SIGNIFICANT MAJORITY SUPPORTED THE WAR. BUT LESS THAN A YEAR LATER, BY MAY OF 1966, THE MONTH BEFORE WE GRADUATED, THAT NUMBER HAD DECLINED TO 48% AND IT KEPT DROPPING UNTIL IT WAS 28% IN MAY OF 1971 AND THEY STOPPED ASKING THE QUESTION.

ALL OF THE MEN IN OUR CLASS REMEMBER THE FIRST DRAFT LOTTERY SINCE WORLD WAR 2 IN DECEMBER OF 1969 WHERE DRAFT

NUMBERS WERE ASSIGNED BASED ON OUR BIRTHDATES. MY NUMBER WAS 138.

I WAS THE ONLY ONE AMONG 6 KIDS IN MY FAMILY TO GO TO COLLEGE. MY COLLEGE ATTENDANCE KEPT ME OUT OF THE DRAFT FOR AWHILE. BUT THEN I GRADUATED.

I WENT TWICE FOR AN INDUCTION PHYSICAL. THE FIRST TIME I WAS FAILED BECAUSE I HAD FLAT FEET AND WAS OVERWEIGHT. THE SECOND TIME THEY WEREN'T DISCRIMINATING AS MUCH BUT BY THEN PRESIDENT NIXON HAD DECIDED TO WIND DOWN THE WAR.

IT IS A SAD REALITY THAT A DISPRORTIONATE NUMBER OF THOSE DRAFTED INTO THE ARMY WERE POOR OR BLACK, MANY OF WHOM COULD NOT ESCAPE THE DRAFT THROUGH A COLLEGE DEFERMENT.

IN 1967, 29% OF THE DRAFT ELIGIBLE MEN WERE BLACK AND 64% OF THOSE WERE CHOSEN TO SERVE IN THE WAR. BUT OF THE 63% OF THE DRAFT ELIGIBLE MEN WHO WERE WHITE, ONLY 31% WERE CHOSEN.

IF YOU GO TO THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON DC AND SEE THE NAMES OF THOSE 58,609 PEOPLE WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE WAR, THERE IS ONE HIGH

SCHOOL WITH MORE LIVES THAN ANY OTHER IN THE UNITED STATES, AND IT IS A HIGH SCHOOL FROM PHILADELPHIA, THE OVER 90% BLACK EDISON HIGH SCHOOL WHERE MY FATHER ATTENDED BACK WHEN IT WAS STILL CALLED NORTHEAST HIGH SCHOOL.

IT IS A MISTAKE, THOUGH, TO SEE THE VIETNAM WAR ONLY IN TERMS OF THOSE WHO WERE DRAFTED TO GO. AT THE START OF THE WAR IT WAS PRIMARILY A VOLUNTEER ARMY.

IN PREPARATION FOR THIS BRIEF TALK, I DID SOME RESEARCH AND RAN ACROSS THE TESTIMONIES OF MEN WHO ANSWERED THE QUESTION “WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE TO BE IN HIGH SCHOOL DURING THE VIETNAM WAR?”

ONE OF THEM, DENNIS HAYES FROM MICHIGAN, SAID: “I WAS A HIGH SCHOOL HONOR STUDENT AND RECEIVED SCHOLARSHIPS IN BIOLOGY AND CHEMISTRY [BUT] I TURNED DOWN MY SCHOLARSHIPS AND ENLISTED IN THE MARINE CORPS. BECAUSE I KNEW THEY WERE DOING A LOT OF THE HEAVY FIGHTING AND I WANTED TO EXPERIENCE WAR LIKE MY FATHER DID IN GERMANY AND MY UNCLE DID AT GUADALCANAL AND IWO JIMA. I FELT IT WAS MY DUTY TO GO AND ANSWERED TO JFK’S CALL OF “ASK NOT WHAT YOUR COUNTRY CAN

DO FOR YOU, BUT WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR COUNTRY.”

“SOME PEOPLE THOUGHT I WAS CRAZY, I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO GET A REAL EDUCATION IN LIFE AND IN DEATH, AND I DID. BY THE TIME I GOT TO VIETNAM, THERE WERE 300-400 DYING A WEEK AND I WAS THERE THE TWO HOTTEST YEARS OF THE WAR.

“SO, I GUESS FOR ME MY MEMORIES OF HIGH SCHOOL SOON FADED IN THE JUNGLES AND RICE PADDIES OF VIETNAM WHILE US TEENAGE WARRIORS GREW UP RAPIDLY AND WERE FOREVER CHANGED AS BROTHERS IN ARMS.”

IN 1986, THE WASHINGTON POST DID AN IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION OF WHO ACTUALLY FOUGHT IN THE VIETNAM WAR. AND THEY RELEASED A REPORT ENTITLED: “THE MYTH OF THE VIETNAM VET.”

YES, AS I MENTIONED EARLIER THE POOR AND BLACK WERE DISPROPORTIONATELY REPRESENTED IN THOSE WHO WERE DRAFTED. BUT, AS THIS REPORT SHOWED, OF THOSE 58,209 WHO ACTUALLY DIED, 73% WERE VOLUNTEERS. THE BLACKS WHO DIED WERE REPRESENTED AT THE SAME RATE AS THE GENERAL POPULATION, 13%.

THE LOSS OF ANY LIFE THROUGH WAR IS A TRAGEDY. BUT THE GREATER TRAGEDY WAS THE RECEPTION THAT VIETNAM WAR VETERANS FACED WHEN THEY RETURNED HOME.

THERE WAS NO MASS RECEPTION. RATHER THAN RETURNING AS UNITS MEN CAME HOME INDIVIDUALLY WHEN THEIR TERM OF SERVICE WAS UP. THERE WERE FEW PARADES. 350,000 CAME HOME MAIMED HAVING LOST LIMBS OR THEIR EYESIGHT OR BEING WOUNDED IN OTHER WAYS.

MANY OF THEIR FELLOW AMERICANS WERE CAUGHT UP IN THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT AND THESE VETERANS NOW REPRESENTED WHAT TO THEM WAS IMMORAL FOOLISH OR DOWNRIGHT CRIMINAL. SO IT WAS THE VETS WHO TOOK THE ABUSE WHEN IN FACT THEY WERE JUST DOING THEIR DUTY.

IF PEOPLE SAW INNOCENT VIETNAMESE BEING KILLED IN THE MY LAI MASSACRE OR DESTROYED WITH NAPALM ON THE EVENING NEWS, THEN YOU - YOU VETERAN - MUST BE THE MURDERER RESPONSIBLE.

SOME EMPLOYERS WOULDN'T EVEN CONSIDER HIRING VIETNAM VETS BECAUSE THEY ASSUMED YOU MUST HAVE PARTICIPATED IN

THE RAMPANT DRUG ABUSE - MARIJUANA, HEROIN, LSD, COCAINE - THAT FLOURISHED AMONG THE MILITARY IN VIETNAM.

FOR A LONG TIME THE US GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT RECOGNIZE THE DAMAGE CAUSED BY POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER OR AGENT ORANGE AND VETERANS LANGUISHED, BEING UNABLE TO SLEEP OR HAVING SUDDEN FLASHBACKS WITH NO ONE TO HELP IN UNDERSTANDING HOW TO COPE. PTSD WAS NOT TAKEN SERIOUSLY UNTIL THE 1980S.

EVEN THE VFW, THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS, WOULD NOT EMBRACE THE VETERANS OF VIETNAM AT FIRST BECAUSE THEY SAID VIETNAM WAS NOT IN FACT A WAR, BUT A POLICE ACTION. SO YOU DON'T QUALIFY TO JOIN.

WELL, WE WANT TO DO THE OPPOSITE TONIGHT. WE WANT TO EXPRESS OUR APPRECIATION, OUR RESPECT, OUR HONOR FOR THOSE IN OUR CLASS WHO HAVE SERVED IN ANY BRANCH OF OUR U.S. ARMED FORCES.

AS I CALL OUT THE NAME OF YOUR BRANCH OF THE SERVICE, WOULD YOU COME UP TO THE FRONT TO BE RECOGNIZED?

THE U.S. ARMY

THE U.S. NAVY

THE U.S. AIR FORCE

THE U.S. MARINES

THE U.S. COAST GUARD

THE NATIONAL GUARD

GOD IN HEAVEN, WE GIVE YOU THANKS FOR THESE AND ALL OUR FELLOW AMERICANS WHO HAVE SERVED, FOUGHT AND DIED OR ARE NOW SERVING TO PRESERVE OUR COUNTRY AND ITS PRINCIPLES OF FREEDOM AND EQUALITY. WE THANK YOU FOR THE PROGRESS THAT HAS BEEN MADE IN APPLYING THOSE PRINCIPLES TO THE WAY WE LIVE AND RELATE TO ONE ANOTHER.

WE PRAY FOR OUR PRESIDENT, OUR SENATORS AND CONGRESSMAN AND THE SUPREME COURT THAT THEY MIGHT BE BLESSED WITH YOUR WISDOM TO GUIDE US WELL.

WE ARE GOOD, OH GOD, AT TIMES OF BEING POLAR OPPOSITES IN OUR OPINIONS. THE VIETNAM WAR REMINDS OF THIS. IN THOSE TIMES, HELP US TO TREAT ONE ANOTHER, AND

**ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH WHOM WE DIFFER,
WITH RESPECT AND LOVE.
IN YOUR NAME, AMEN.**