

Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Honored Guests . . . Colleagues . . . Comrades . . . Classmates . . .

I am deeply honored by the opportunity to share some thoughts with you on the occasion of this Remembrance Weekend.

Tomorrow will mark exactly 54 years since the West Point Class of 1968 sailed our white hats high into a shimmering Summer sky and set off on 706 separate paths in life.

Twenty of those paths were tragically truncated. . . in a war . . . in a far away land . . . in service to the Nation. Our classmates who fell in Vietnam were truly terrific young men . . . each a leader of character . . . confident, competent, and honorable . . . epitomizing the type of officer West Point strives to develop. Full of promise and potential. Our Class . . . and our Nation remain diminished by their loss.

Since the 20th anniversary of our graduation, members of our Class have gathered every 5 years or so . . . to pause . . . to reflect . . . to remember.

Most of those gatherings have been here . . . in the shadow of the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial . . . the Wall. A fitting place for remembrance.

I was a Major . . . branch transferred from the Field Artillery to the Judge Advocate General's Corps . . . and assigned in the National Capital Region when the Wall was dedicated.

At the wise and gentle urging of my wife Megan, I attended the dedication ceremony. It was a grey November day . . . the ground was soaked from heavy rains the night before . . . and a penetrating chill hung in the air.

My vantage point . . . standing at the rear of the very large crowd attending the event . . . the many waving signs, flags and banners . . . all collaborated on that occasion to accord me only a minimal and distant view of the Wall.

I heard the succession of speeches by those who conceived, championed, and drove the project to a successful completion. I could appreciate their pride of accomplishment and the relief they must have felt . . . after bucking the tides of government bureaucracy and public controversy regarding the design, nature and location of the memorial . . . but the words offered, and the overall atmosphere of the event seemed to me too self-congratulatory. In my mind the event and the comments offered should have focused more on the devotion, dedication, and sacrifice of those whose service had brought their names to be etched on the monument.

The words that echoed and reechoed in my mind were not those delivered from the podium. Those words were crowded from my consciousness . . . by phrases etched on the walls of the looming Lincoln Memorial . . . words that President Lincoln offered during his address at the dedication of a military cemetery on a portion of the Civil War battlefield in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania . . . Mr. Lincoln observed that “. . . in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate we

cannot consecrate we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract . . .”

I left the dedication ceremony that day never having truly visited the Wall . . . and feeling vaguely disquieted . . . unfulfilled.

But guided again by Megan’s gentle wisdom, I returned some weeks later, and that experience moved me to write a blank verse piece which I titled . . .

A Dedication

I in stoic silence stood that dour day upon a matted, misty, mourning National “front lawn” and heard the coursing lofty words . . . muttered, uttered, whispered, spake and shouted out . . . by us . . . about us . . . and them . . . and us . . . while silent echoes answered all. And saw the yawning black and granite gash that tallied up the cost. A void that bleeds a list of names . . . of lives untimely lost.

An off’ring scorned . . . but no less nobly put than those than those that stand in stone at Bunker Hill, Bastogne, Inchon, the Arizona . . . sites most intimately known . . . to muted lips . . . and them alone.

And dry was I in throat and eye, the words, well meant, caroming near . . . but missed the mark.

Weeks later, the hoopla, din and crowds dispersed, I went alone to find again a friend I’d lost, last seen in jungles green a half a world away. And he, the Wall and I . . . we wept.

During that second visit, I discovered the National Vietnam war memorial to be a hauntingly beautiful tribute to those who served . . . and particularly to those who fell in Vietnam.

It is . . . appropriately . . . a place of solemn reflection.

There is a mystic quality to the Wall. We who served in Vietnam revisit our experiences there. We hear again the deafening din of action. We smell again the sweaty stench of boredom and of battle. We experience again . . . in the pit of our gut . . . the starkly raw and intense emotions that surged within us, punctuating our time “in country” . . . and at times the emotions that arose when we returned home . . . to a dubious reception. We are mesmerized to see our images reflected among the ranks of those whose names are etched on the polished granite panels. We know again the irrational guilt and soaring elation of survival. We come again, most profoundly, to realize our own mortality . . . and for an instant . . . we glimpse the darker corners of our souls.

And as we contemplate the names of comrades in arms who fell, we know anew the fraternal love that so closely binds those who have shared the battle . . . and we feel anew the aching sense of loss for those who did not come home.

I cannot pass before this Wall without glimpsing from the corner of my eye the firm and resolute look of Bill Ericson . . . a twinkle in the eye of Don Colglazier . . . the impish grin of Rick Hawley . . . a conspiratorial wink from Harry Hayes . . . the infectious smile of Ken Cummings . . . the deep and earnest concern on the visage of Ace Reichert when he and I last spoke in a sandbagged hooch on a Fire Support Base a little east of Pleiku.

Intellectually, we know that the final resting places of our 20 classmates who fell in Vietnam are broadly geographically dispersed . . . but on these occasions . . . whenever we visit this place . . . they are all here . . . Their presence is palpable. In the words of West Point Chaplain Bishop H.S. Shipman's poetic hymn **The Corps** . . . "they are here in ghostly assemblage" . . . and our hearts do "stand attention" and are "strengthened" . . . as we "**grip hands**" once again with them . . . "**though it be from the shadows**" . . . and as we . . . on this side of the Wall . . . grip hands once again . . . with each other.

In my mind, our Class' periodic gatherings are not just marked by somber and reverent remembrances of our youthful comrades . . . and of our youthful selves . . . they are also very profoundly marked by a renewal of resolve and commitment on the part of all of us who gather in physical presence . . . and by all those classmates unable to attend in person . . . but who join us here in spirit . . . to the virtues and values imbued, embraced and underscored during our days in Cadet grey . . . to Duty . . . to Honor . . . to Country . . . to noble and selfless service and sacrifice across the broad range of our endeavors . . . to those same virtues and values that are so clearly exemplified in the too . . . too . . . brief lives of our 20 classmates who fell . . . on fields so far away . . . in the full flower of their youth. Those 20 who . . . from so early on . . . have marked our place in the Long Grey Line.

The shadows are lengthening for us. Other stones have been etched over the passing years . . . Some, through the latent and lurking ravages of Agent Orange, are codicils to the black granite list of names on the Wall.

In the fullness of time, still more stones will be etched . . . and ultimately our Class will assemble . . . elsewhere . . . a full 706 strong . . . but for so long as any one of us remains on this side of the Wall, our 20 brothers who fell in Vietnam . . . will be remembered . . . their selfless service to the Nation will be honored . . . and their loss will be deeply felt and profoundly lamented.

A few days ago, our country paused to remember and to honor all those throughout the Nation's history who have been called to give the "last full measure of devotion" in military service. We gather here today to pause again . . . a focused echo of that National remembrance. For us, this day, too, is Memorial Day.