



## Vietnam Veterans Recognition Event Speech

By: Jennifer McDaniel

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Good morning, thank you all for coming today. Welcome to our March Statewide Veterans Employee Resource Group meeting. I know we have a lot of guests today, here in support of our Vietnam and Vietnam era veterans. We are honored that you have joined us today. For those of you that are new to us, my name is Jennifer McDaniel. I am the Co-Chair of the state VERG.

In recent weeks I have had the privilege to correspond with some incredible people. People I would not have met had we not held this event this morning. So what do you say to a Vietnam veteran? Well it started with what I had hoped was a simple ask, an ask for names. Names of individuals who were currently serving in State government, who had previously served during Vietnam. I knew there would be some reluctance in response. If you are familiar with the history of this era at all you may have some idea of why. But slowly I received some replies. Then more. Then I started to get some questions. And as I started to answer those questions and share some of my thoughts, I started to get some stories and even some pictures. I don't take this for granted. I was being trusted with their history, and for some their reoccurring fears.

Today we will honor those men and women that served our country during the Vietnam War. Some served as ground troops in a combat capacity in country, some were a mile off shore in a Navy ship providing gunfire support, some were Air support, while others provided the necessary support roles both in Vietnam, other nearby posts and some back in the States that are so vital during a foreign engagement. Whatever the specific method of service, all have been affected in some way by that experience.

We hear and read about places like An Khe, and Plei Ku, but for those in the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne like Craig and Gene those are more than words, those are the places where they read the maps that got them through the trails to the places they

needed to be; to face the enemy or face them blindly in the dark on night time perimeter patrols.

Or the Ia Drang Valley where some of the first battles involving American troops took place in 1965. Where Landing zone X-Ray was not just a random place mentioned in some war movie.

The Tet Offensive, one of the largest military campaigns of the [Vietnam War](#), launched on January 30, 1968, by forces of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army against the forces of [South Vietnam](#), the United States, and their allies. For a young man like Bill fresh out of Coast Guard training that was his first introduction to Vietnam, and to him it smelled like half the country was on fire.

Maybe you were a Marine that took part in a Combined Action Program in the village of Phu Da. Or maybe you were a member of the 18<sup>th</sup> Military Police Brigade like Robert.

Or during the fall of Saigon, what must that have looked like as members of our Navy and others assisted with the evacuation. There are men in this room that could tell you.

I can't possibly name all of the individual battles, the many "hills" that were taken, the many landing zones that were cleared, the lives lost.

Many of you served multiple tours, some of you were wounded, like Chris and Don. At least one of you here today had the distinct honor of escorting the bodies of some of your fellow Marines back home. An honor you wouldn't trade but wished you'd never had to know. All of you remember what it was like, wherever you may have been and in whatever capacity you may have served.

Not everyone being honored today served inside Vietnam, some didn't leave the United States, but this was no easy time to be in the military. This was not a well supported period in our history. Every position in the armed forces during this time was a support role to a very unpopular wartime effort.

Let's back up just a bit and take a quick look at the veterans of our past. WWII, "the war to end all wars" was fought by American patriots, referred to as the greatest generation. And they were.

Korea, equally fought by Americans considered to be patriots and justified in their duty. And they were. They were given the full support of the government and the American people.

Then came Vietnam. Often referred to as "the most unpopular war of our time". American troops comprised of volunteers and drafted personnel were deployed to fight what turned out to be an unwinnable war. This taking place when America was changing.....when Americans in protest of the war confused policy decisions made by government officials with the troops themselves. Forgetting that America's sons and daughters had no input on the decisions being made around them and for them. Instead in some cases even blaming the troops for the war itself. We as fellow veterans know that no one is more against a war than the soldiers that fight in them. We pray for peace as we prepare for war. When we take an oath to protect and to defend we do this with full commitment. We do not have the time and capacity to sit back and decide if the reasons are appropriate or justified. This is not our job. And that was not their job. Our job is to carry out the orders that are given to us. And we do this with the understanding that our lives may be sacrificed for a cause that we may not agree with or even understand at the time.

When service members are deployed there are a couple common goals, one is to keep your buddy alive, the other is to get back home. For some, going back home, turned out to be nearly as traumatizing as where they had been. In some cases our returning soldiers were spit on, cursed at, called disgusting names, or often ignored altogether. For most, there were no homecoming parades, no recognition of service and no "thank yous" or offers to help them settle back into their communities.

Some of these prejudices still exist today and many of our fellow veterans from this era still endure the criticisms of a decades old misplaced, misguided stigma of blame and ignorance.

Because of those experiences, it is often difficult to get a Vietnam veteran to even respond to a request for their names in order to include them in a special event meant to honor them.

In 2011 Congress made an attempt to right the wrong done to the veterans of the Vietnam era. Finally acknowledging the return of our troops. March 30 was declared Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day, marking the 38th anniversary of the withdrawal of U.S. combat and combat-support units from Vietnam.

Washington State followed suit in 2013. After many years of combat, all US troops were withdrawn from Vietnam on March 30, 1973, under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. More than 58,000 members of the United States Armed Forces lost their lives and more than 300,000 were wounded in Vietnam.

I am not a high ranking official or Head of State. However I am a veteran and the granddaughter of a WWII veteran and the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, so I know what heroes look like. Today we are here to show our appreciation for our brothers and sisters of the Vietnam era. You have earned our respect, and our gratitude. So Ladies and gentlemen what do you say to a Vietnam veteran? You say "Thank you and welcome home!!!!!"

When I call your name, if you would please come forward, collect your certificate, and remain standing in front of the room. I captured every name that I was given but if I leave anyone out please let me know and I will get that corrected TODAY. I know there are more that could have been here today but were either unable or in some cases unwilling to be. We will keep them in our thoughts and prayers.