JERRY: THIS IS A CONDENSED VERSION (Do not include the Title in your revision, as it will literally read everything aloud you write.)

VIETNAM MEMORIAL SERVICE OCTOBER 8, 2021

Good afternoon may name is Jerry Nelson, U. S. Air Force Senior Master Sergeant, Retired. It is an honor to welcome you to the Southeast Asia Pavilion on the Grounds of the United States Air Force Academy, for the Vietnam Security Police Association’s Vietnam Memorial Service during our October 8, 2021 Annual Reunion. Chaplain Jim Stastny, please come forward for the invocation prayer.

Thank you, Jim.

This wonderful venue was created as a tribute to the Air Force Academy graduates who served in the Vietnam War. The pavilion was spearheaded by the Class of 1970 as a permanent memorial to those men and women who served in Vietnam and Thailand. Other classes have joined in that endeavor to ensure that the facility is properly maintained. At the conclusion of our memorial service, I encourage everyone to walk through the pavilion to see the honored history of the graduates who are Vietnam Veterans and then feel the spectacular manner in which the facility tells that story.

The following words were written as a Tribute to the Vietnam Security Police Association on the occasion of our Reunion, October 12, 2002:

“Men who served together in good and bad time, who gave themselves unselfishly to their country…, to their unit and to their mission; men who stand in later years with hand over heart when the flag of America passes in review…; men whose affection for one another forged lasting bonds of respect and friendship…; these men are the core and heart of our country… They are America! Be quietly proud of yourselves and of each other... Take warmth from the ties that bind each of you to the other. I am humbly proud to have served with men like you. Robin Olds, Brigadier General, United Stated Air Force (Retired), Commander, 8th Tactical Fighter Wing.”

Brigadier General Olds was a giant of a man and one of the most recognized pilots in United States Air Force history. During his tenure, he was a three-time Ace in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam where he shot down 17 enemy planes. He was one of our wing commanders at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand where he pioneered the Wild Weasel Program. He was also the Commandant of Cadets at this Academy from 1967-1971. Earlier today, we were able to spend some time at a Bronze statue of General Olds that was just recently completed. His letter certainly sums up, in a few words, the bonds that hold our Brotherhood together. In the civilian sector, those feelings of love and pride do not exist in other relationships unless you are in law enforcement or the fire service. On Wednesday evening, we read the names of our 32 Brothers who stood their final Guardmount; and the 3 Sisterhood members who passed since our last reunion. We all have benefitted from their friendship and sacrifice. Our brothers are now remembered forever in our Life Member #111, and we will always remember them as well as our Sisterhood members.

Today, this ceremony honors and celebrates a group of Air Policemen, Security Policemen, and Augmentees who answered their nation’s call, then served and fought at locations throughout Thailand and Vietnam. Serving in Law Enforcement, Security, K-9 and/or Safeside, they performed magnificently, never allowing an Air Force base or any other location to be overrun or taken by the enemy. That is our legacy, our proud history of your service, and I am proud to call you Brothers. I am talking about YOU!

There were more than 2.7 million military personnel who served in South East Asia. Of those, over 303,000 were wounded and 2,338 were Missing In Action, of which 1,900 are still unaccounted for. Our Air and Security Police Squadrons had over 20,000 Air Policemen and Security Policemen who served in Thailand and Vietnam, with approximately 500 wounded. Our country suffered over 58,000 Deaths of US troops. And the Security Police career field suffered 111 deaths.

The Vietnam Conflict was the first war that was brought home into the living rooms of America via television. I remember talking with my Mother, prior to her death and asked what it was like having a child in Vietnam, and what was she thinking. She said it was horrible! She watched the national nightly newscast, hoping and praying that she would not see me on a stretcher being loaded onto a helicopter. I am certain that all of our parents had the same horrifying experience. This war divided America and resulted in an anti-military attitude among many of our citizens. We all remember what it was like when we returned to America… with people calling us baby killers, spitting on us, and shouting horrible things about us. I remember returning to Elba, a small south Alabama community. Even my close, life-long friends were stand-offish and treated me differently. It took time for them to realize that I was the same guy they knew. Little did they realize; and I certainly could not explain…why that was not the truth!

We left the shores of Vietnam to return to what we called The World, to reunite with our families and loved ones. However, Vietnam came home with us. The truth is we did not know how much Vietnam and Thailand would remain a part of our lives, and for many of us, our lives had changed forever. We were not the immature young men who had volunteered to serve our nation. We were forced to grow up in a hurry and do things unimaginable only months and sometimes mere days before leaving Vietnam. Many of us did not carry visible physical wounds; but were suffering from PTSD and Agent Orange related illnesses. Most of us were too proud to admit that our nightmares, or hypervigilance, from what some called battle fatigue or a form of mental illness. We refused treatment, or to acknowledge the existence of Post Traumatic Stress, and suffered in silence for many years. It happened because there was a stigma attached to a Diagnosis of PTSD, the “D” a very notable word indicating “Disorder.” Thank goodness that has changed. Unfortunately, the result were strained relationships, divorces and very difficult lives led by many veterans. I am proud to say, that today, things are much different. Social awareness of Post Traumatic Stress, advanced treatment and Veteran’s understanding of VA treatment availability has resulted in many more veterans seeking treatment, including suicide prevention. If anyone has not sought treatment, I urge you to pursue it. It will certainly change your life.

We also brought the war home in the form of Agent Orange. Far too many of us suffer or have died from the effects of Agent Orange. Annually, the VSPA briefs on the various diseases that we have as a result of our exposures. Our own government would not admit the diseases were caused for decades from Agent Orange exposure. A health battle and constant problem that often troubled our members, especially as it relates to proof of exposure. Now, government fully realize and admit their responsibility. If you are suffering, I encourage you to contact a Veteran’s Service Officer, seek assistance and file a claim with the VA.

While we have all endured hardship and have experienced multiple issues related to our service in Vietnam and Thailand, I am so very proud of you and absolutely proud to call you my Brothers. We have all sacrificed in some way and answered our Nation’s call. You were absolutely the best America had, then and now. I am so honored to be in this distinguished group. The letter by General Olds, which I read earlier, describes you perfectly!

There is another special group that I need to honor today, who are committed to their motto: “Taking Care of Those Who Take Care of Their Own.” The Sisterhood members live that motto 24 hours daily, year after year. They stood by us, raised our children, paid our bills, and waited for us to come home. For those who found us later in life, sometimes broken and in need of healing, they loved us and have taken care of us as we take care of our own, as we sought treatment for Agent Orange related cancers, and Post Traumatic Stress. Our Sisterhood is a wonderful group of wives and companions, who care for us, hold our hand in the night, listen to us cry out with nightmares, and help us function when it seems like we can’t make it through the night or day. They push our wheelchairs and always stand by our side whenever things go sideways. When things go dark, they hold things together, helping us realize we are going to be okay. They are our biggest supporters and sometimes need to give us the guidance that saves us. I can readily admit that without my spouse’s love and support, I would have suffered a far worse outcome in this life after the war. I know that I am not alone. The Sisterhood is our backbone. Thank God for their support. It is hard to imagine how many of us would have dealt with life without this amazing group. Thank all of you for your love and support. We could not have survived this road without you.

Our journey as Veterans of Vietnam and Thailand is not over. According to the latest statistics, there are over 500,000 surviving Veterans who served in Vietnam and Thailand. In this group alone, we have well over thirteen hundred Veterans of that war, with many who served multiple tours and some who served in both countries. We must continue to preserve our history, tell our stories, and serve our nation in any capacity possible. I am proud of my Vietnam service, and I know all of my Brothers are as well. I am looking forward to many more reunions with the Vietnam Security Police Association—this is not our last rodeo.

In closing, I would like to read a poem written by one of our VSPA Brothers, Randy “RAMPS” Stutler who was unable to attend the reunion this year. He wrote these poetic words on July 19, 2008. It is titled:

“ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS”

(Copyright 2008 by Randy Stutler)

Echoes softly calling now, within my heart I hear Loved ones who have passed away, and many friends so dear. When we were young and fearless, we’d never count the cost. Life’s challenge was no great thing, just one more river to cross. In Vietnam we stood our ground, young troopers’ side by side. We bit our lips and hid our fears, and honored those who died. Through all the years of pain and sorrow, time extracts its cost, And mortals we are bound to pay, one more river to cross. Oh, if I could just go back to the way we were back then, Laughing, living, full of life, proud warriors, and brave men. But I know deep within my soul, as I count the friends I’ve lost, There too lies ahead for me, one more river to cross.

Howard Yates will now pipe Amazing Grace, then Chaplain Jeff Kerkhoff will provide our closing prayer. … This concludes our ceremony; please enjoy the South East Asia Pavilion. We will board buses again in approximately 1 hour.