

# Veteran's Day 2000

By Jerry Ewen

Happy Veteran's Day and welcome home to all my Vietnam Veteran Brothers and Sisters.. I am honored by the opportunity to speak here in this special place on this special day. I want you to know that speaking here, plus the added privilege of having most of my family here to share this moment with me, is a definite high point in my life. A lot of what I have to say today is directed toward our sister Vietnam Veteran's, so I hope there are a few of you here.

I am very thankful to have most of my family here to share this with me. I have a wonderful family. Our families are veterans too, you know. They live our stories, too, good and bad, and deserve a lot of credit for hanging in there with us. I am in awe of my family, they are such wonderful people.

This storytelling program is a great idea. Only by telling our stories will our true history and the life lessons that go with it will be passed along to our children and our grandchildren. For a long time, I have been angry about the sensationalized Oliver Stone Hollywood version of who we are and what we did. It's a long way from the truth, and we need to work hard so that version of us won't be passed along into history.

In the presence of this memorial, I feel I am on hallowed ground. The setting here, in our nation's capitol, and so close to the 58,000 names on the wall, intensifies that feeling. The statues are a wonderful tribute to our sister veterans. The weight and intensity of your service, the benefit of it to the rest of humanity, and the cost of it to you provides an aura of emotion here that is so strong it is not only felt, but can almost be seen. That aura is also around Diane Evans and Linda Watson, two Vietnam nurses who I am privileged to know. I just met Marsha, and already I know that she is the same kind of warm, wonderful, person. I asked Diane once if she didn't tire of having Vietnam Vets hug her

and weep. Her answer was not yes or no, she

simply said, with great intensity, "I love Vietnam Vets." Her uncomplicated answer said everything about how so few of you gave so much to the rest of us, and how this memorial continues to elicit such intense emotions in all who come here. I am much more than a casual observer to this memorial. In Vietnam, I was there to see first hand the service that this memorial honors. I was a med-evac helicopter pilot, or Dustoff, as we were known by everyone. I was in Vietnam from April '68 to April '69...the 22nd year of my life. I served in the 498th Med. Co. at Lane Field near Qui Nhon for the first 6 months, and then the 54th Med. Det. at Chu Lai for the last 6 months. When I left my unit to come home, they gave me a plaque that said, I flew 1 107 missions and extracted 2669 patients from the field during my year in Vietnam. Day after day, we brought patients to the forward aid stations and hospitals scattered throughout Vietnam. The hospitals I went to were located at exotic places such as Da Nang, Chu Lai, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, Pleiku, and An Khe. We flew patients out to the "Sanctuary" and the "Repose", two Navy hospital ships. We brought to you load after load of young bodies, shot, burned, and blown up by booby traps. Always we had faith in you, knowing you were equal to the task, but not understanding the price you were paying for giving so much to so many in such a short time.

One of my most vivid memories of a nurse in Vietnam came at the end of my last mission there, just a few days before I went home. We had been called out on an urgent mission about midnight. A mission classified as urgent meant that death was imminent. Upon landing, we quickly found out that we had been ambushed. The VC frequently did this, to wound one of our guys, then set up a trap for the helicopter they knew would soon come. We were easy targets, with lots of noise, big red crosses and no guns. We landed in this particular LZ after a blackout approach, then were hit by heavy automatic weapons fire. In seconds, our patient

was killed, our medic was hit through the shoulder, I was hit in the leg, and my co-pilot took a round through his right elbow. On the way back to the 312th Evac in Chu Lai, Phil Scheil, my co-pilot and good friend, almost bled to death through a severed artery. Needless to say, it was chaos and it was terrifying. Some of the instruments on the panel had been shot out, but the needles were still in the green, so I didn't even notice. The crew chief finally was able to trip the emergency handles on Phil's seat and get a pressure bandage on Phil's arm to slow the bleeding. The OR crew was waiting for us when we landed at the hospital pad. I will never forget the intensity of care and compassion on the young Nurse's face as she cut away Phil's seat belt and his flight suit and took over the pressure bandage on his arm. Today, that image of care and concern provides a contrast to the chaos and terror of that night. I know this, that the helicopter crews wouldn't have been able to do what we did for our troops on the ground if we didn't know that you were there.

I am ashamed to say that I did not consider the price paid by Army Nurses for their service until I began to hear about this memorial project. The intensity of my own emotional response to this memorial also came as a surprise to me. From the beginning, I have felt that this memorial is mine, too. At first, I wondered about this, because after all, it is the Vietnam Women's Memorial. Before you start to wonder about me, please understand that I never wear articles of my wife's clothing! I didn't understand why I felt so strongly about this, but after talking with Diane Evans and some other Vietnam Vet friends I was finally able to see it. Look at the man being so tenderly cared for in the statue. It's him. The soldier who was lying on the ground, wounded and in pain. The one who was down there depending on all of us, many times for his very life. He is my connection to this wonderful memorial. In Vietnam, we had a tremendous life saving system set up. Sometimes it would only be min-

utes from the time a man was wounded until he was in the OR. That was the beauty of the helicopter. From the medic in the field, to the flight crew, to the OR team, to the hospital care, we were professionals dedicated to saving lives, and we did it better than it had ever been done before, anywhere. The wounded man on the ground depended on every one of us to do our job and to do it without hesitation. Dustoff policy was to be airborne in 3 minutes after receiving the call for an urgent mission. In Vietnam, I learned that courage is not the absence of fear. I don't believe people who say they have no fear in combat. I found out

that courage means performance in spite of being afraid. I spent a lot of my tour in fear. Sometimes I was afraid I would be killed, or that someone on my crew would be killed. Sometimes I was afraid I would not see my wife and my parents and my brother and sisters again, and what that would do to my mother. I was afraid that I would never again see the Wyoming mountains where I grew up and that I love so much, but mostly, and more than anything else, I was afraid that I would not measure up, and that I would let that wounded man down and that he would die waiting for me to come and get him. This was such a strong feeling...it was a driving force in what we did. I remember taking a vote one day among my crew. We had been circling above one of our ground units who were in a heavy duty firefight. We were supposed to be waiting for them to pull back and break contact before we went in, but they took a bunch of casualties while we were waiting. We saw them get hit as they crossed a rice paddy, we could see several of them fall. This unit was surrounded, in the open, pinned down, and they needed us bad. It looked like there was no way the pickup could be done, to even try to go in to them looked like certain death. I told my crew that one "no" vote meant that we would wait until things improved before we went in. Not one of our crew of four voted no. Not one. I couldn't say no either, but I really, really wanted to. I start-

ed the approach knowing that I was living my last minutes. God flew with us. We were able to get in and get our patients and get out. Was I scared? You better believe it! Still, I became so strongly identified with what I was doing, that for years after my tour was over, and even for a long time after Vietnam was over, I felt guilty because I left while I was still needed. There were still wounded on the ground. I left Vietnam with my life's work unfinished. Our military indoctrination was that we were in Vietnam to "fight communism", but as a 19 year old, I didn't understand any of that. I had a hazy idea that the French had been defeated there a few years before, but I had no idea why we were in the same place fighting the same people. I believed there were people in our government that did understand such things, and I trusted them completely. I didn't realize until later that they were not worthy of our trust. My part of the war as I saw it wasn't to try to understand, my part of the war was to save lives, and to stay alive in the process. My part of the war, my sole purpose for existing, was to get that man on the ground back to the hospital before he died. It was heavy duty stuff for a Wyoming ranch kid. To say that I was short on life experience at that time was an understatement, but...Imagine, swooping down, sometimes under fire, racing in and then back out again, to save a life. Not just once, but day after day. I loved it...I loved those helicopters, too, and after spending a lot of my working years flying them, I still love them. Like the 60's song by Steppenwolf, helicopters became my "Magic Carpet Ride", and what a ride it was! Talk about job satisfaction...it was intense, it was terrifying, sometimes it was downright fun, and it was rewarding beyond measure. I became very good at saving lives, and never since Vietnam has anything I have ever done come close to comparing to it. In some ways, I still feel like I reached the pinnacle of my life at age 21. Always, though, always, it was for the wounded. I remember one day we were about 30 seconds out of the LZ, again on an urgent mission, when the ground troops came on the

radio and said, "No need to hurry, Dustoff, our WIA just became KIA".

Our medic got on the intercom and said, "Hurry, get me to Him". We rushed our patient on board, to find that he had been shot through twice, and had sucking chest wounds in both lungs. By the time we got him back to the 91 st Evac Hospital in Tuy Hoa, our medic had got the man restarted, had given him the first liter of IV solution, and the man was breathing on his own. The medics in Vietnam were another group that I couldn't begin to say enough good things about. I remember watching our medic insert a trach tube while enroute. The Huey is a wonderful machine, but the ride never was the smoothest. It took a tremendous amount of skill to perform that operation in flight, on a rough helicopter, but such acts were routine in Vietnam. Combat as I knew it had no lofty ideas or national goals and it had nothing to do with communism; we were there to support each other. Vietnam Vets learned this, and we learned it well. When we needed a memorial, whether it was the Vietnam Women's Memorial, the Wall, or the Wyoming Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, we went out and did it ourselves, and we did it for each other. We even paid for a lot of ourselves. When we are in trouble or need a friend, who do we call? Another Vietnam Vet.

I remember another incident; we were called out in the night for an urgent mission. It was raining, the kind of rain I have seen nowhere else except Vietnam, and the wind was blowing hard. You all remember what it was like, I'm sure; this was in the winter, probably January. Everytime we left the lights of the runway at Chu Lai, we would lose all outside reference, even with the search light and landing lights on. We tried for maybe an hour, and had to give it up. We didn't always get there in time. I have had that mission on my conscience for years. I hope and pray that over on the Wall, there is not the name of someone who would still be alive if I had been able to do my job better.

I remember also the Red Cross girls, or "Dough-nut Dollies" as they were affectionately called. One of my favorite Vietnam stories occurred one day in Qui Nhon. After dropping patients at the evac hospital, we were asked by Dustoff control if we would mind a passenger to our next destination, one of the LZs farther north in our AO. We were delighted to find out that our passenger was a Doughnut Dolly! The Red Cross girls took a tremendous chance when they rode with us, because if we received a mission while they were on board, they went with us to make the pickup, no matter what the situation on the ground was. The patients always came first. After this particular young lady ran out and jumped on the ship, the tower operator commented that we must rate pretty high, to be lucky enough to haul such cargo. So, prior to takeoff, I hovered over to the tower and climbed high enough for the tower operator to look into the back of the helicopter. I told the crewchief, "Tell her to give him a wave!" She not only waved, but pulled her dress hem up to give him a playful cheesecake pose. The tower crew loved it, we loved it, she loved it, and we all went back to business feeling a bit better about things. She brightened our lives that day. It's a funny thing about those little bright spots others put into our day, they provide illumination in our lives for years. I'm a little embarrassed to say that we learned to pull a little pitch as the girls walked up to the running helicopter. With the loose skirts they wore, the rotor wash could provide a wonderful sight! If any of you are ex-Red Cross girls, I apologize. Another confession I should make is that we used to low level down the beach at Chu Lai, then pop up over the nurses barracks to see if we could catch any of them sunbathing. Finally, the hospital CO threatened to shoot us down if we didn't stop. I'm sure my confessions come as no surprise to anyone.

My memory of much of my tour is still very clear. I remember many of the missions I flew. I remember places where I landed, I often recall the look of the jungles and the green rice pad-

dies below. I remember the smell and feel of the heat, and the odor of burning deisel fuel and human waste. I recall the faces of my friends and the faces of our hootch maids and some of the other Vietnamese civilians that worked on base. I remember what the country looked like and how it smelled when it rained so hard we had to hover down the roads, and I can easily recall the beach below our airfield at Ky Ha, and what a welcome oasis it was, with sea breeze and hot sand. The smell of JP-4 exhaust and the thump of Huey rotor blades gives me a thrill. The music of the Doors, The Beatles, The Mamas and the Papas, The Supremes, and CCR bring back some special feelings. I remember how I had my room arranged; I even remember the pictures I had on the wall. I could still draw maps of hospital landing pads, parking ramps and revetments all over Vietnam, but of the 2669 patients I had on board my helicopter, I can't recall even one of their faces. I think it's strange, because I talked to some of them in triage before they went into the OR. In the forward aid stations at Duc Pho, LZ English, and LZ Uplift, I went in and hung around to talk to them after the mission was over, and help if I could. I recall in too vivid detail many of the wounds I saw. At times, when I would rather not remember, visions of jagged bones, blood, and grey flesh come to mind. I smell human blood and burned flesh. Human viscera has a smell unlike anything else. You don't forget. Still sharp in my memory is the young soldier we brought in who had lost both arms and both legs to a booby trap, and who was still alive. I remember puddles of blood under the deck plates when we cleaned the helicopter out after a really bad day, and how it smelled. I remember cleaning blood off the map case that I kept by my seat in the helicopter, blood from a good friend that was shot in the seat beside me. I know that all over America, there are men whose lives we saved, and there are children and grandchildren who would not be here if we had not flown those men back in, and if our nurses had not cared for them and nursed them back to life. It is one of my heart's desires to

replace the wounds in my memory with the names and faces of real, living people. I have thought about one man in particular . One night on the pad of the 312th Evac. hospital after an unusually hairy mission near Tien Phouc, a wounded Special Forces Captain hobbled around and opened my door. I thought he was going to shake my hand, or maybe punch me in the nose for taking so long to get to him, but instead he pulled my arm down, and then he kissed my sleeve. It was one of the highest compliments I ever received. That mission was so bad and so dangerous, and my crew and I came so close to losing our lives, that when it was over I felt like I had a vested interest in his life, almost like I was related to him. I would like to see him again, and to know that he is all right. I want very badly for him to have made it home. There are others I wonder about...almost three thousand guys...where are they?

I have a poem here that I wrote several years ago, shortly after the dedication to this memorial. This poem is in tribute to our nurses. It is also my personal experience, from my heart. I was not alone in writing this poem, God helped me put these feelings into words; the poem really belongs to Him. I know this for a fact, because the memorial, this poem, and the sharing of common experiences are what brought Kathy and I together in friendship with Mike and Diane Evans, and with Jim and Janice Ottman. Only God can do such things. Mike and Diane, Jim and Janice, there is no such thing as circumstance, good things come to God's children as part of His plan. You guys are a treasure to us.

Since Vietnam, life has been good to me. There have been some ups and downs, as is to be expected, but from the perspective of a lot of years and some painfully gained wisdom, I can honestly say that I am a far better man for having served in Vietnam. I'm glad I went, and I am happy to have been able to serve my country. Now, I have a wonderful place to live, I own

my own business, and most importantly, I have a great family. I'm in awe of them, they are such wonderful people. I am blessed to have most of them here with me today. In closing, as I read this poem, I want to have my granddaughter, Brittany, come and stand with me. I am so very pleased to have Brittany see this statue and to have her meet some of our women who served. Our children need heros, and I want Brittany to understand your examples of courage, love, and sacrifice, and to use your example to help shape her life.

The poem that Jerry has referenced,  
**'PIECES OF YOUR HEART'**  
can be read in its entirety on the  
following page

## PIECES OF YOUR HEART

*Each broken body, each face drawn with pain  
takes a piece of your heart.  
Pleading eyes are desperate for assurance.  
"Will I be all right? "  
"Yes. " Is a lie.  
Gaping wounds leave gaping holes in your soul.  
Endless faces without names, with endless pain.  
Smells of seared flesh and human blood  
cannot be scrubbed off.  
Thumping helicopter blades bring more wounded.  
And more...and more...and more.  
Each death leaves the weight of terrible knowledge.  
You were with him, now he is gone, and his family  
still believes he is alive.  
Nurse...Mom...Sweetheart... Wife.  
To each need you give...and give. ..and give.  
Until there is nothing left of you.  
Then you try...and try..and try.  
Giving from where there is nothing left,  
a dry wasteland forms in your heart.  
Your body came home, your spirit stayed.  
Hating the place, you ache desperately to go back.  
Going through the motions of years, surviving,  
remembering, pain is heavy around your heart.  
"Where are they now? "  
Large, dark innocent eyes of wounded children  
float through dreams, betrayed, accusing  
You need to touch the pain, but recoil in fear:  
If you feel, it could destroy you.  
A Vietnam Women's Memorial brings pride.  
You take the risk, you step forward.  
Stop. Be still and listen a moment.  
Do you hear. . . ? It's "The guys!! "  
The same arms that reached in need extend now in love.  
The voices that cried in pain call out now in joy.  
"Welcome home, sister!"  
"I'm home, I made it, thanks for seeing me through!"  
Thank you for taking care of me!"  
"I love you!"  
"I didn't forget!"  
"Look at my children...and my grandchildren!! They're yours, too!  
You saved my life!!"  
See how we return to you the pieces of your heart?*

With my utmost respect to my sister Vietnam  
Veterans

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