

Speech at the 2000 VHPA Reunion in Washington, DC, July 2000

By Joe Galloway, Author of "We Were Soldiers Once, and Young"

Thanks to all of you for giving me the honor to speaking to you. I have got to tell you that looking out across this assemblage I must confess: I haven't seen this many bad boys collected in one location since the last time I visited Leavenworth Prison.

When I first learned that I would be doing this gig I asked an aviator buddy of mine what else I needed to know.....and he said, well, most of you would be bringing your wives along.....that half of you were so damn deaf that you couldn't hear a word of what I was saying.....the other half would be so damn drunk you couldn't understand what I was saying..... so I might just as well talk To the ladies.....

I have waited years to be able to share this story with so august a group of aviator veterans as this: A few years ago I was at a large official dinner and I was seated next to a nice lady who was the wife of a two-star general. I knew the lady had two college- age daughters and I also knew that one of them had been dating a Cavalry lieutenant.....so I thought to make some polite conversation and I offered her my condolences at her daughter's choice of companionship. "Oh No!" the general's wife said. "He is a fine young man. Nothing wrong with him.....and at least he isn't a goddam aviator!"

I just wanted you to know that your successors in the bizness continue to win friends and influence people in high places. Before I go along any further in this thing I need to ask you some questions: --Is there anyone here who flew with the 1st Cavalry Division? The 229th? The 227th? How about the old 119th out of Holloway? Any Marine pilots who flew them old CH-34 Shuddering Shithouses??? Now I know I am among close friends.....I know that old Ray Burns from Ganado, Texas, is here.....and I have got to tell you a story about me and Ray that goes back to October of 1965. Plei Me SF Camp was under siege by a regiment of North Vietnamese regulars. I was trying to get in there.....like a fool.....but after an A1E and a B57 Canberra and one Huey had been shot down they declared it a No-Fly Zone. So I was stomping up and down the flight line at Holloway cussing.....when I ran across Ray. He asked what the problem was and I told him. He allowed as how he had been wanting to get a look at that situation and would give me a ride.....

I still have a picture I shot out the open door of Ray's Huey. We are doing a kind of corkscrew descent and the triangular berms and wire of the camp below fill that doorway.....along with the puffs of smoke from the impacting mortar rounds inside the camp. Hell.....I can scare myself bad just looking at that photo.

Well old Ray drops on in and I jump out....and the Yards boil out of the trenches and toss a bunch of wounded in the door and Ray is pulling pitch.....grinning.....and giving

me the bird. When the noise is gone this sergeant major runs up: Sir, I don't know who you are but Major Beckwith wants to see you right away. I ask which one is the major and I am informed he is the very big guy over there jumping up and down on his hat. I go over slowly. The dialogue goes something like this: Who the hell are you? A reporter. Son, I need everything in the goddam world from food and ammo to water....to medevac.....to reinforcements.....and I wouldn't mind a bottle of Jim Beam.....but what I do not need is a goddam reporter.

And what has the Army in its wisdom delivered to me? Well....I got news for you.....you ain't a reporter no more; you are my new corner machine gunner." Ray.....I want to thank you for that ride.....wasn't for you and Chuck Oualline I wouldn't have had half as much fun in Vietnam. Hell.....every story anyone has about Vietnam starts and ends with a helicopter.....you guys were simply fantastic. Thank you all. Thank you for every thing....large and small.

Now I guess I got to get down to bizness. All of you know that I have spent most of the last forty years hanging out with the Infantry.....a choice some folks view as perverse if not totally insane. But there was always method in my madness: With the Infantry things happen close enough that I can see what's happening.....and slowly enough most times that even I can understand what I'm seeing. There's just this one little downside to my long experience with the Infantry:

During that time I have personally been bombed.....rocketed.....strafed..... and napalmed by the U.S. Air Force.....U.S. Navy.....U.S. Marines.....and U.S. Army Aviation.....as well as by the air forces of South Vietnam.....Laos.....Sri Lanka.....India.....and Pakistan. Now I don't consider myself an inconsiderable target.....and wasn't even back when I could fit comfortably behind a palm tree.....but here I am....running my mouth.....nothing hurt beyond my dignity. Don't get me wrong; I don't hold any grudges against those gallant winged warriors. But ever since the first time they attacked me and missed....I have never ever used the words "surgical bombing strike" in any story I ever wrote.

I had the chance to say some good things about all of you at the Memorial Service at The Wall on Sunday. I meant every word of that..... and more. You chopper guys were our heroes in Vietnam. You were our rides....but you were much much more than that. We were always either cussing you for hauling our butts into deep kimchi.....or ready to kiss you for hauling us out of it. I have a feeling that without you and your birds that would have been a much shorter and far more brutish war.

You were our heroes, though, first last and always. You saved us from having to walk to work every day. You brought in our food and ammo and water.....and sometimes even a marmite can full of hot chow. To this day I think the finest meal I ever ate was a canteen cup full of hot split pea soup that a Huey delivered to a hilltop in the dry paddies of the Bong Son Plain in January of 1966. For a moment there I thought if the Army could get a hot meal out to an Infantry company on patrol maybe.....just maybe.....we could win the damn war. Oh well.

I think often of all that you did for us.....all that you meant to us: You came for our wounded. You came to get our dead brothers. You came....when the fight was over.....to give us a ride home from hell. There isn't a former Grunt alive who doesn't freeze for a moment and feel the hair rise on the back of his neck when he hears the whup whup whup of those helicopter blades.

What I want to say now is just between us.....because America still doesn't get it.....still doesn't know the truth, and the truth is: You are the cream of the crop of our generation.....the best and finest of an entire generation of Americans. You are the ones who answered when you were called to serve.....You are the ones who fought bravely and endured a terrible war in a terrible place. You are the ones for whom the words duty. .honor. country have real meaning because you have lived those words and the meaning behind those words.

You are my brothers in arms....and I am not ashamed to say that I love you, would not trade one of you for a whole trainload of instant Canadians.....or a whole boatload of Rhodes Scholars bound for England.....or a whole campus full of guys who turned up for their draft physicals wearing panty hose. On behalf of a country that too easily forgets the true cost of war.....and who pays that price....I say Thank you for your service! On behalf of the people of our country who didn't have good sense enough to separate the war they hated from the young warriors they sent to fight that war.....I say we are sorry. We owe you all a very large apology.....and a debt of gratitude that we can never adequately repay.

For myself and all my buddies in the Infantry I say: Thanks for all the rides in and out....especially the rides out. It is great to see you all gathered here for this reunion. A friend of mine, Mike Norman, a former Marine grunt....wrote a wonderful book called "These Good Men" about his quest to find and reunite with all the survivors of his platoon from Vietnam. He thought long and deep about why we gather as we have done this evening and he explained it thusly:

I now know why men who have been to war yearn to reunite. Not to tell stories or look at old pictures. Not to laugh or weep. Comrades gather because they long to be with the men who once acted their best.....men who suffered and sacrificed.....who were stripped raw.....right down to their humanity. I did not pick these men. They were delivered by fate and the military. But I know them in a way I know no other men. I have never given anyone such trust. They were willing to guard something more precious than my life. They would have carried my reputation.....the memory of me. It was part of the bargain we all made.....the reason we were so willing to die for one another.

As long as I have memory I will think of them all.....every day. I am sure that when I leave this world....my last thought will be of my family and my comrades.....such good men. I'm going to shut up now and let us all get down to the real business of drinking and lying.....er.....telling war stories.

Thank you. I salute you. I remember you. I will teach my sons the stories and legends

about you. And I will warn my daughters never ever to go out with aviators.....

Good evening. God bless...