

Honoring those who have died in the past year

By Gary Roush

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288. That is how many of us have died in the past year. 288.
229 died since our last reunion in August last year.

55 of these men were in the Air Force, Navy or Marine Corps. This is a higher portion than those who served because their average age was older than Army pilots. The reason is that almost all of them had to be college graduates and fixed wing rated before flying helicopters. Army pilots did not.

We are here to remember and honor those who have died since their service in the Vietnam War, especially those who have died in the past year. And we are here to celebrate their lives. Just over 10,000 Vietnam helicopter pilots have died since the Vietnam War. Including the 2,165 who died in Vietnam, that means about 30 percent of us are gone. About one third!

It may surprise you to know that the average age of the 2,165 helicopter pilots killed in the Vietnam War was 25.4 years old. You have heard a lot about Army warrant officers being 19 when they served in Vietnam. The requirement was that warrant officer candidates had to be 19 when they received their wings. Sixty one of our KIAs were 19 which means that only about 3 percent of helicopter pilots were 19 when they served in Vietnam.

In the decade of the 1950s, 7 died.

In the decade of the 1960s, 232 died with an average age of 29.7 with the majority killed during training.

In the decade of the 1970s, 858 died with an average age of 33.9.

In the decade of the 1980s, 1,093 died with an average age of 46.3.

In the decade of the 1990s, 1,773 died with an average age of 58.

In the decade of the 2000s, 3,538 died with an average age of 66.8.

So far in this decade, 2,641 have died with an average age of 73.3 so it will likely be over 5,000 for this decade.

According to the Social Security Administration, those of us alive today which is about 30,000 with an average age of 72.5 years can expect to live another 14 years to an average age of 86. 25 percent can expect to live past 90 and 10 percent past

95. That means there should be about 3,000 of us still alive 22 years from now in 2,038. Just want to give you some hope.

Who were these men? These were the boys who went off to war in their early 20s and came home men just like their fathers and uncles who served in World War II. These were the sons of the greatest generation. Their fathers and uncles went off to war to fight the evil empires in World War II. Their mothers and aunts took the places of the men in factories and kept the home fires burning while their men were off to war for two to five years at a time. It was shortly after the great depression. It was a time of rationing and shortages and great hardships for all. Many men did not return. Casualties were enormous and all families were affected directly or indirectly. But it was a time of unwavering patriotism.

They grew up in the aftermath of these life changing events. They were told of the sacrifice and heroics and honor of their elders. They were taught to be proud of our soldiers and our country. They learned that Communism like Nazism was the source of all evil. They dreamed of the day that they too could proudly serve our country and fight Communism like their fathers fought before them. So all of them volunteered to fight in our war, the war in Vietnam.

Their war was the helicopter war and they were its pilots. They were the taxi drivers and the delivery men and the gun support. They carried the infantry into battle and they brought them out. They were the lifeline, the supply line, and the ambulance for the grunts. Joe Galloway claims they were God's own lunatics. They were young, mostly in their 20s, and they were crazy and they came of age with rotor blades above them and bullets flying all around them. They were part of a generation of soldiers General Hal Moore claims to be every bit as brave and noble as those who stormed the beaches of Normandy. He thinks they were as great as the greatest generation.

As Vietnam helicopter pilots, they accumulated more true combat flight time than any other combat pilots before or since. Their main helicopter was the icon of the Vietnam War, the UH-1 Huey. Like them, the Huey, along with the Huey Cobra have more combat flight time than any other aircraft in the history of warfare. They paid the price for this unprecedented exposure. 14% of KIAs in Vietnam were officers and 28% of those officers were helicopter pilots. **We will not forget our fallen.**

The greatest generation, their parents generation, is credited with creating great wealth and prosperity in our country. Our generation was credited by some with

trying to destroy it.

World War II was the good war fought against evil. To many of our generation, our war was the immoral war filled with atrocities, hopelessness and victims. They were mis-portrayed as the biggest victims of all. They were not - and are not victims.

War is a messy business. Approximately 300 American soldiers were executed during and after World War II for crimes and atrocities while none were executed from the Vietnam War. Yet the vast majority of World War II veterans upon their return were rightly received as heroes, while all of us were unfairly vilified for unspeakable atrocities. The news media was heavily censored during the great war while we had television and totally uncontrolled and uncensored reporting. Unfortunately, too much of the media had - and has exercised a bias that greatly distorted what they did and how they did it.

Out of the 2,583 listed as missing in action in Vietnam, all but a few have been accounted for. By contrast, there are still 78,000 unaccounted-for Americans from World War II. The accounting of our missing is unprecedented in warfare. This is in large part due to their helicopters and those who flew them into hot LZs and the teeth of enemy fire, to take out the wounded and dead who in earlier times would have been left on the battlefield.

There are many myths out there about our brothers. Even today there is the perception that Vietnam veterans are homeless, drunken addicts, who have a high rate of suicide and incarceration. These are just not true.

The truth is that their service was basically no different than their fathers' service. They served our country just as honorably as their fathers did. They have proven all of the Vietnam War critics wrong. Not only were the critics wrong about the morality of the Vietnam War, they were also wrong about our brothers. Unlike their fathers, they came home from war to ridicule and scorn with no support network. Their fathers had welcome home parades and organizations like the VFW and the American Legion. They had no parades and although they qualified to belong to those organizations they were not initially welcomed. The ideals and respect they had for the greatest generation did not apply to them. Their treatment was unfair, unwarranted and unprecedented.

So what did they do? They got on with their lives. They became very productive members of society. They were more successful than their non-military peer group

and they advanced America to even higher prosperity and greatness. Their parents had the wind at their backs after World War II which made it easier to prosper. Our brothers had to overcome unfair and unjustified stereotypes to succeed, but they did and they proved that they were as great as the greatest generation.

Our war was a major battle in the Cold War and it became its turning point. Up until the Vietnam War, more countries in the world were switching to Communism. That reversed during the Vietnam War and more countries started moving toward democracy and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union. **So they helped win the cold war.**

The domino theory was correct. Their involvement in Vietnam provided time for countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand to stay free of Communism. Without the Vietnam War, that whole region would have been lost to Communism.

Finally, they did not lose the war in Vietnam. All of them could honestly say, “We were winning when I left!” because it is true. Their war was over in early 1973 following the peace settlement signed in Paris in January ‘73 and the final withdrawal of combat troops in March ‘73. The fall of Saigon happened two years later in April 1975 because the U.S. Congress cut off funding to the South Vietnamese causing them to run out of fuel and ammunition.

They were rightly proud of their service and deserve the honor and respect that was bestowed on generations of warriors before them. Not only did they serve our country honorably, but they also have taught their children to honor and respect national service. Many of them have children who have served or are serving in our armed forces today.

As part of my responsibilities as database chairman, I read nearly all of the obituaries as they are entered into our databases. These obituaries are brief snapshots of these men’s lives and they are truly remarkable. As an example in the past year three Marine Corps and two Army pilots have died who flew with the presidential flight detachment as part of their exemplary military careers. Imagine being responsible for the flight safety of the most powerful person in the free world.

Here are a few statistics about those who have died over the past year. About 17 percent continued careers as pilots after leaving the service. A similar percent worked as entrepreneurs, retailers or in private industry. Eleven percent were

government contractors and 9 percent did public service. The rest were farmers, educators, engineers, bankers, policemen, ministers, medical professionals, lawyers and even one was an actor and one a professional card player. They don't sound like homeless dope addicts or baby killers to me.

There are mistakes in our data. Hardly a week goes by without being contacted by someone who says, "despite the rumors I am not dead." You might be surprised that some of these mistakes come from the Social Security Deceased Index but mainly from similar names reported by well intentioned people.

Here is a sampling of those who have died in the past year:

Ed Franklin was born Dec. 13, 1937 and was placed in an orphanage by Christmas that year. He never met his parents, had no siblings and no other family members and was never adopted. Despite a non-traditional upbringing he prospered by enlisting in the Army, becoming a helicopter pilot and spending a 21 year career. Ed died peacefully in his sleep at the VA hospital here in Reno on April 6th.

Monte David Johnson died May 19, 2016. He joined the Navy Reserves while still in high school. After nine years in the Navy, he served as a police officer for three years then entered the Army where he flew Hueys and Cobras for the 1st CAV. He was awarded the Silver Star and three Distinguished Flying Crosses among other awards. After retiring from the Army, he flew Life Flight helicopters for a hospital and after that retirement he worked on a farm with his son-in-law. His buddies in the 1st CAV tell a great story about how Monte blew the doors off a truck with rockets from his Cobra.

On May 31st 2016, Thomas Cato West died at the age of 83. Tommy was a West Point graduate and attended flight school at Gary AFB. He did three combat tours in Korea and Vietnam. His first tour in Vietnam was in 1962-63 with the 57th Transportation Company flying H-21s out of Tan Son Nhut. The 57th was later reorganized as the 120th Aviation Company making him one of the pioneers in developing combat helicopter tactics. Next he attended the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School in Patuxent River, MD. In 1968-69, he returned to Vietnam as Commanding Officer of the 604th Transportation Company and later was Director of Plans, 34th General Support Group. He worked on several research projects for the Army and NASA. After retiring from the Army, he worked for the FAA and NASA continuing to pioneer the integration of helicopters into the air traffic control system. A true pioneer.

John F. Guilmartin, attended the Air Force Academy and Air Force Helicopter flight school. He served two tours in Thailand flying HH-3E Jolly Green rescue helicopters. During his second tour in April 1975, he flew off the attack carrier USS Midway during the evacuation of Saigon. Between tours, he attended Princeton University under Air Force sponsorship, earning his Masters and PhD in History. He served on the faculty of several universities including the Air Force Academy and Ohio State University. Joe earned many military and civilian awards and honors including the Legion of Merit, two Silver Stars and several Air Medals. He died on March 10th this year.

Lieutenant Colonel Walter B. Russell, Jr., died in his sleep on May 17th 2016. He was 86 years old. After graduating from West Point in 1951, he embarked on a distinguished military career, earning, among other commendations, the Legion of Merit, Silver Star, two Purple Hearts, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and Bronze Star. As a 23-year-old first lieutenant, Walt fought in Korea in the famous 1953 battle of Pork Chop Hill. In the movie of the same name based on the battle, he is played by Rip Torn and his best friend, West Point classmate, and brother-in-law, Joseph G. Clemons, Jr., is played by Gregory Peck. Walt deployed to Vietnam with the 1st Cavalry Division to be with the men he had helped train as part of the 11th Air Assault. Only a few days after arriving in country, he sustained a sniper's bullet to the head while leading a combat assault. The wound resulted in extensive permanent paralysis to his left side. Army doctors told him he would never walk again, and counseled that he should resign himself to a passive life of television and puttering around the house. Determined to defy them, Walt fiercely pushed himself through a grueling year of rehabilitation at Walter Reed Hospital. Against all expectation, Walt taught himself how to walk again. Walt retired from the Army in 1966 and, still refusing to be bested by his physical disability, began building a new life for himself as a civilian. He put himself through Emory Law School, serving as president of its student body, and passed the Georgia bar in November 1970. That same month he started his own law practice and was elected to the Georgia House of Representatives, where he served three terms. He retired after 25 years of politics and practicing law in Decatur. During these remarkably productive years, Walt mastered his disability with iron self-discipline, maintaining a rigorous schedule that required rising at 5:00 a.m. to ride his stationary bicycle before facing exhausting days of campaigning, holding office, and running a law practice.

Richard D. McCaig retired from the Army Reserve as a CW4 after 23 years. He moved to San Diego and flew for the sheriff's department and the marshal's office. Dick never missed a reunion in 30 years until he was seriously injured in a

helicopter accident while flying for a museum where he was a docent. That was in April 2014. You probably remember Dick as a member of the reunion banquet honor guard. Dick died from his injuries on February 19th 2016.

Ben Gray and I served together in the 242nd Assault Support Helicopter Company at Cu Chi in 1968-69. He was a CW3 on his second tour. Ben was registered to attend this reunion so I was looking forward to seeing him again. Unfortunately his daughter, Laura contacted me to let us know that he died June 15th.

Roger Olney and I also served together in the 242nd. I gave Roger an in-country orientation ride that was memorable. We crashed and burned our Chinook that day. That story is in the new book just printed by the VHPA. Roger was our operations officer. He died just a few days ago on June 23rd.

These men were our mentors, teachers, students, confidants, antagonizers, tormentors – they were our brothers and family. They were our comrades in arms who were willing to give their lives for us as we were willing to give our lives for them. They trusted their lives to us and we to them. It was a bond that to understand you have to experience. Believe me this bond is very powerful and strong.

In Vietnam we had to manage our mourning and grief because when we lost our brothers in combat we had to strap those helicopters back on and get on with our jobs. Grieving could wait, so now as we mourn the loss of more of our brothers, the grief pushes itself to the front and sometimes becomes difficult to bear, but as we learned in Vietnam, life is for the living and life goes on. That is what our brothers would want and what we want when our names are inevitably added to the list. So today we honor our brothers by paying tribute to them with this upcoming memorial service and if you are like me you think about them nearly every day.

We will not forget our fallen.

Our membership database contains over 40,000 names. All of those names will eventually be added to the died-after-tour database to become our legacy. We have arranged with the Vietnam Center and Archives at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX to receive this final database to make available to the public in perpetuity. We have also established an endowment fund with the Vietnam Center to fund the management of the VHPA Collection forever. There will be more about the endowment in the business meeting. The most important part of the VHPA Collection will be information about all of us in this final database. So it is critically important that we collect as much information as we can.

One idea in this regard is to encourage you to write your story in a way that it can become your obituary. All of you either personally knew or knew of David Adams who was the editor of our magazine, The VHPA Aviator. David died on the 11th of August last year. He did incredible things to make our magazine world class. One unique thing he did was to write his own obituary. It was in the September-October 2015 issue of the Aviator. All of you can do the same thing. Tell us your story. Not only will this make writing your obituary easier for your family, but it will provide us with accurate information about you to add your piece of our legacy to be read by your relatives who have not yet been born.

In the course of a single week over the past year, I learned of four good friends dying. One of those men was a very special person as he saved my life. His name is Adam Runk. Adam enlisted in the US Marine Corps out of high school and served for three years. He then enlisted in the Army where he served as a crew chief, attended officer candidate school and then helicopter flight school. Adam was a faithful VHPA member and attended many reunions over the years. Adam was my instrument flight instructor during flight school at Fort Rucker in 1967. He was by far the best flight instructor I ever had in my almost 50 years of flying. He was a kind and gentle man while being cheerfully demanding at precision flying while under the hood. He took a personal interest in his students. As example, Adam and his wife Sandy attended Susan and my wedding while I was his student. They made up half of the audience as it was a very small wedding at a Fort Rucker chapel.

Adam came to visit me while in Vietnam on his second of three tours. He also kept in contact over the years even visiting us in upstate New York driving all the way from Florida where he worked for NASA at the Kennedy Space center after retiring from the Army. A few years ago he called me in tears to tell me he was no longer physically able to travel to attend that year's reunion. VHPA reunions meant a great deal to him and he meant a great deal to me. I learned after his death that his relationship with me was not unique as he befriended nearly everyone he met. He was truly a wonderful human being and he is sorely missed. How he saved my life is a story for another time. Adam died July 27th 2015.

My guess is that nearly all of you have similar experiences. One of the sad things I have to do is tell people the person they are looking for has died. So get in touch with those friends from long ago before it is too late.

I am proud to have known some of these men and I am proud to have served with a couple of them. They **had achieved as much if not more than the greatest generation.**

We will not forget our fallen.

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