

## Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day

May 7, 2020



### Welcome

**Mr. Dan Gannon, Chair, Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day Committee and combat-disabled Vietnam Veteran:**

Good morning and welcome to the Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day Ceremony. While we are not able to gather at the Iowa Vietnam Memorial Wall as we have for the last “12” years due to the COVID-19 virus, we are glad that you are participating in our “virtual” Recognition Day, to remember and honor our Vietnam Era Veterans at this 50th Commemorative Vietnam War event.

This is the 13th annual Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day. We have gathered every year since 2008, when an Iowa Senate resolution established May 7th, as the day when we would come together at this memorial to recognize and thank all of our state's Vietnam Veterans for their service - and to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

**Posting of the Colors:** *The Colors have already been posted today due to the format. The National Anthem Would be next followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.*

**Mr. Gannon:** Chaplain Col. Dean Baer, Iowa Army National Guard, Retired, of Ankeny Invocation.

**Invocation, Chaplain Col. Dean Baer, USA, Ret.:**

Lord, we seek your presence and blessing as we Honor and recognize our Veterans who fought in Vietnam, those who gave the ultimate sacrifice, those who fought and bear the marks of war and those families affected. Bless all who participate and share their time, abilities and words. In the Lord's strong name we pray. Amen.



**Mr. Gannon:** I'm Dan Gannon, Chair - of the Iowa Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day Committee, and a combat disabled Vietnam Veteran. We are glad that you took time from your day to be with us to remember, recognize, and honor our Vietnam Veterans. I want to recognize the Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen and Women, and members of the Coast Guard that we came to salute today. Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your service and all that you have provided and continue to provide to our Nation and to the state of Iowa.

The Iowa Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was dedicated on Memorial Day 1984. It is a Reflection of Hope in its design and what it stands for. For your information. The Vietnam Wall in DC was dedicated in 1982. Our inscription reads, "A monument established by the citizens of Iowa to honor Iowans who served during the Vietnam War. These absent friends will never be forgotten."

Again, thank you for your service.

### **Keynote Speaker Introduction**

**Mr. Gannon:** Vietnam Veterans of America is the nation's only congressionally chartered organization dedicated to the needs of Vietnam-era veterans and their families. VVA's founding principle is "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another." Our key note speaker that I am about to introduce, emulates that principle throughout all of his leadership activities.

Brigadier General Harold (Tommy) Morgan Thompson was born in Kingsley, Iowa on August 3, 1937. Grew up on farm near Kingsley in northwest Iowa. He joined the National Guard in Le Mars, Iowa in 1954. He attended University of South Dakota (1956-1960) Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts. He taught at the K- 12 level 1960 – 1965 in northwest Iowa. He became a Full Time Training Officer with the National Guard at Sioux City in 1965. Career highlights include:

-Served in Viet Nam in 1968-1969.

-Served in a variety of Staff and Command Assignments in the Iowa National Guard, to include Chief of Staff of the Iowa Army National Guard and Deputy Adjutant General of the Iowa National Guard.

-Graduate of the Command and General Staff College in 1972.

-Graduate of the Army War College in 1984.

-Attended Drake University (1985-1986) Master's Degree in Public Administration.

-Retired after 41 years of service in 1995 at the rank of Brigadier General.

-Served in a series of special projects while serving with the National Guard.

-In 1979, Served as State Project Officer for Coordinating State Resources for the Papal Visit to Iowa.

-In 1985, Led the State Task Force for the Farm Crisis "Debt Set-a-Side" Program.

-In 1990, Led a State coordination effort with State Departments to address the Contract issues for the Iowa Communications Network.

-In 1993 -1994, Led State effort to respond to the State Flood Disaster and the State Flood Recovery effort.

-Served as the Executive Director of the Iowa Communications for 7 Years (1994-2002).

-Served as a Board Member of a National Company (ADESTA) located in Omaha, Nebraska for 7 Years (2003-2009).

Let's give Brigadier General Thompson a warm and gracious welcome for his attendance here today.

### **Keynote Address**

**Brig. Gen. Thompson:** Greetings to my fellow veterans. While we may not be able to gather for this recognition, it is important that we pause this day and remember. Our veterans made great sacrifices during and after the Vietnam War. Some did not return, we need to remember our fallen comrades.

We were members of the 8,744,000 US combatants who saw action during the 20 years of involvement in support of South Vietnam. From 1955 when the US sent instructors; to 1964 when the US sent combat units following the Bay of Tonkin incident; to 1975 when the US withdrew forces.

My story begins in 1965. I was the training officer for the 2d Mechanized Infantry Battalion located in northwest Iowa. The National Guard Battalion of 913 soldiers was mobilized in mid May 1968 and sent to Fort Carson, Colorado for accelerated training. I was a captain at the

time and a company commander. This was the first mobilization of combat units since the Second World War.

The Battalion completed training in September and was combat ready for deployment.

In September, General Westmoreland came to visit the mobilized units and announced that we were to be sent as filler replacements since the war was very unpopular and the army could not afford to have multiple casualties from one Iowa community.

I arrived in Saigon, South Vietnam and was sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Division of the Republic of South Vietnam. A division of 19 battalions stretching from the Demilitarized Zone in the north to the city of Da Nang.

Upon my arrival in Hue, the senior advisor assigned me as G3 operations advisor. As a captain, it was very large rank gap since I was advising a full colonel. I found the Division Commander and the Operations officer to be highly competent thanks to many previous advisors. One of my first assignments was to complete the after action report for TET 1968. It was a well-planned and coordinated attack by the North Vietnam Army. They surrounded battalions in the field and swept into Hue. They sought out South Vietnamese who were supporting the US and executed hundreds before withdrawing. The Division Headquarters and the Advisors Compound were the only two installations to remain under our control.

With 19 battalions, some were in contact or in major operations at all times. I gave the daily briefing of the day and night operations and their results. Once the briefing was completed, the Division Commander and his advisor, the G3 Operations Officer and myself boarded a helicopter and flew to where the most serious contact was happening. Our Area of operations was mainly triple canopy jungle in mountainous terrain. There is some low land located along the coast with only one road running south along the coast.

I truly believe in divine intervention based on some things that happen. On one occasion, we were coming in to land near the Laos border. As we were less than 100 feet from touching down, the North Vietnamese fired 122MM artillery into the landing zone. The pilot pulled up on the collective so hard that it broke three of the four mounting brackets holding the engine in place. We flew several miles over triple canopy jungle back to Hue. No one could explain how the engine remained intact during that flight.

On another occasion, the North Vietnamese attacked one of the outposts located on the demilitarized zone. The outpost was manned by a Vietnamese company. The outpost was heavily reinforced with overhead cover. The attack began with a mortar attack which gave the attackers time to navigate through the mine field and then switching to RPGs, they threw satchel charges into each fortification rendering many dead and wounded. We arrived at the break of dawn. I remained with the chopper as we went in pursuit of the attacking forces. They had reached the protection of the DMZ. Our attempt to get permission to pursue was denied. All the rules and restrictions made it hard to be successful on many occasions.

At the end of the first six months, the Senior Advisor reassigned me to a senior battalion advisor position with a battalion being sent into a North Vietnamese Training Area south of Da Nang. He felt they needed more experience than was currently on the team. I joined the battalion on the day of the combat assault. The night was full action as enemy elements stumbled into our perimeter.

We were in contact for 43 straight days. We took heavy casualties the second day. That was when I learned to appreciate the Chinook Helicopter. Since we had so many casualties, they brought in a Chinook to evacuate the injured and dead. As it lifted out of our location, it began to take small arms and machine gun fire but it absorbed the strikes and never missed a beat.

During the operations we had air support out of Da Nang and Naval gun support from 8 inch guns. These were essential to our success.

We found thousands of pounds of rice buried under gardens and wrapped in plastic. It was disappointing to see it was raised and processed in the US and carried all the way from Hanoi.

We accomplished the mission by removing people, destroying food supplies and killing and capturing many of the staff and enemy.

Most of our time was spent in the jungle. We moved every day in search of the enemy. Each night we would set up camp and then wait until dark and then we would move a few hundred yards and set up our real camp. It proved to foil several mortar and small arm attacks. I can recall one night while I was asleep that I heard the mortar rounds leave the tube and I was in the fox hole before the first one hit.

The US was training South Vietnamese pilots and with only a few days before I was scheduled to leave the Country, we were notified that they would pilot the combat assault into the jungle for the first time. I can remember thinking, I am too short for this. Thank God it was a cold landing zone and everything went well.

While I could go on with my experiences some good and some bad, time is running short so I will wrap up with these thoughts and statistics.

Three quarters of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were volunteers even though there was a draft in place. Over all, we lost 58,220 of this Country's bravest; of that figure Iowa had 868 casualties; while the mobilized battalion from northwest Iowa lost 12 soldiers and had 76 injured.

Because of the duration of the war, many soldiers came to Vietnam as filler replacements. It was unusual since the army and marines train to be a highly integrated fighting unit prior to deployment.

As a filler, each soldier had to quickly assimilate into the team in the midst of ongoing combat. Even with those challenges, US combatants performed in an outstanding manner.

War is not pretty nor easy. The sights, sounds, and smells of combat are etched in the minds of every veteran. There are no comforts of home. You live with what you carry. Your senses become super keen.

Every soldier goes through a mental process of dealing with war. The experiences are truly life changing but your fellow soldiers are your safety net. Knowledge that they will be there for you and you for them, creates a family of brothers.

In conclusion, it is critical that we pause and remember those who gave all. Every veteran personally knows of one or more fallen comrades. Say a prayer for each. Keep their bravery and contribution alive in our memories.

Remember the 58,220 killed, 2646 MIAs and POWs, and the 1601 whose remains have never been recovered.

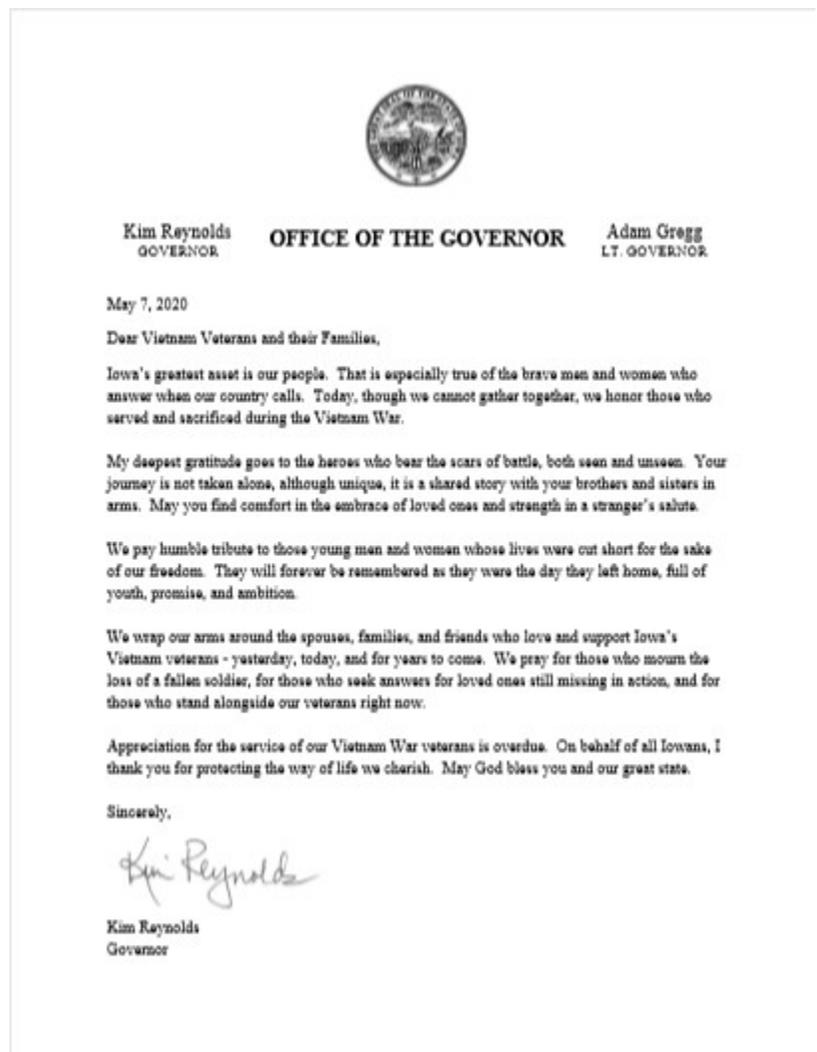
Thank you, and may God bless you for your service to the United States of America.

**Introduction of Governor Reynolds:** *At this time I would normally be introducing Gov. Kim Reynolds, who is currently busy leading our state through this COVID-19 crisis. She asked we share the following remarks for you.*

**Gov. Reynolds:** Iowa's greatest asset is our people. That is especially true of the brave men and women who answer when our country calls. Today, though we cannot gather together, we honor those who served and sacrificed during the Vietnam War.

My deepest gratitude goes to the heroes who bear the scars of battle, both seen and unseen. Your journey is not taken alone, although unique, it is a shared story with your brothers and sisters in arms. May you find comfort in the embrace of loved ones and strength in a stranger's salute.

We pay humble tribute to those young men and women whose lives were cut short for the sake of our freedom. They will forever be remembered as



they were the day they left home, full of youth, promise, and ambition.

We wrap our arms around the spouses, families, and friends who love and support Iowa's Vietnam veterans - yesterday, today, and for years to come. We pray for those who mourn the loss of a fallen soldier, for those who seek answers for loved ones still missing in action, and for those who stand alongside our veterans right now.

Appreciation for the service of our Vietnam War veterans is overdue. On behalf of all Iowans, I thank you for protecting the way of life we cherish. May God bless you and our great state.

### Reading of the Proclamation signed by Gov. Kim Reynolds:

#### Wreath laying

**Mr. Gannon:** A wreath was laid today at the Iowa Vietnam Memorial Wall, on the Iowa State Capitol Grounds. The wreath will remain though the day for anyone who wants to pay their personal respects.

During the Vietnam War years, 115,000 Iowans served in Vietnam in all branches of the military. Their average age was 19. They were still teenagers, barely out of high school not yet old enough to vote for the presidents who were sending them to defend their country.

Eight hundred and sixty-eight Iowans became casualties of the Vietnam War.

Their names are etched in the black granite wall behind me. There are now over 58, 400+ names on the Vietnam Wall in DC. Five Iowa veterans of the war received the Congressional Medal of Honor for their bravery. They are:

Master Sergeant John F. Baker, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, US Army



Colonel George E. (Bud) Day, Misty Forward Air Controller Squadron, US Air Force

Captain Merlyn Hans Dethlefsen, US Air Force

Gunnery Sergeant Jimmie E. Howard, Company C, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division, US Marine Corps

Second Lieutenant Robert J. Hibbs, Company B, 2nd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, US Army, presented posthumously



One of the last two casualties of the Vietnam War was nineteen-year-old US Marine Corps Lance Corporal Darwin Judge of Marshalltown, Iowa. He died on 29 April 1975, the last day of the war during a rocket attack. His death occurred just prior to the final evacuation of the embassy in Saigon.

#### **MOMENT OF SILENCE**

Let's take a moment of silence for all of those that I have mentioned today, which includes the "868"

names on the Iowa Wall directly behind me, those Veterans that are represented by the "In Memory Plaque to my front, and the 83,000 Veterans that are still unaccounted for, since WWII.

I ask Chaplain Baer to provide the benediction.

#### **Benediction**

**Col. (Ret.) Baer:** O God continue to bless the memories, bless all the services of remembrances in our community, state and nation. Bless all you make a special effort to Honor and Support. Especially Bless families who gather this year in unique ways to remember, share stories, and honor their loved ones. Bless our Men and Woman on Duty around the world. Bless our Nation's Leaders as they seek to make us safe and work for Peace. We pray all this in the Name of God, our Creator and Savior. Amen

**Closing:** *Here we would perform our ceremonial Rifle Salute, Sounding of Taps and Retirement of the Colors.*

#### **Acknowledgements**

**Mr. Gannon:** Thank you to David Thornburg and Disabled American Veterans Chapter 20 and Karl Lettow for their undying support to make this program. I also want to thank Suzy Trotter from DAS for her continued logistical support, even despite this year's unusual circumstances.

Thank you for being with us to remember and salute our Vietnam veterans and their families.

When you see a Veteran today tell them, WELCOME HOME, and take the time to thank them for their service to our great country, the United States of America!!!!

May God Bless each of you and your families, and may God continue to bless this great Country of ours that we so love and serve.

We wish you a good and safe day.

Thank You