

## Vietnam Presentation

As a Marine Corps helicopter pilot, I flew hundreds of ARVN into battle and watched them plunge fearlessly into the jungles--often in darkness--with mortars exploding and reddish streams of tracer bullets ricocheting across the battlefields.

I can testify to their heroism. No soldiers were more willing to face death than the men of the Republic of Vietnam. Those men were patriots. They sacrificed their lives and their futures in hopes of freedom for the Vietnamese people.

I will always remain loyal to the people of South Vietnam. The capital of Vietnam will always remain Saigon for me.

I spent six months of fierce combat as a helicopter pilot and another seven months of deadly ground combat with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment. My radiomen were both killed, and I was wounded attacking across the Hoi An River. But after 13 months in battle, I went back home.

Vietnamese soldiers didn't have the luxury of returning home after a year of fighting. Some fought for the entire war. When the war was done, a million of them spent years in communist concentration camps. That made their sacrifice so much greater than mine.

Throughout the war, families suffered the agony of losing loved ones to the communists.

Your families suffered so grievously. In early 1966, an ARVN patrol left a small base high on a mountaintop known as Tiên Phước. There were no troops nearby to support them. They and their Special Forces advisors were attacked and surrounded as they patrolled deep in the valley below. They fought to the death, and every single man on that patrol was killed.

We were like brothers, the Marines and the ARVN. So, when they were killed, my squadron flew into that valley of death and landed beside the jungle where the patrol made its last stand.

Our helicopters carried search teams who probed through the jungle, searching for the dead soldiers. The choppers waited in the rice paddies, their engines idling--their rotors slowly turning. On each chopper, Marine gunners peered nervously over the barrels of their machine guns, ready to open fire at a moment's notice.

Small spotter airplanes flew overhead, keeping watch on us. Suddenly, the radios crackled with reports that Vietcong troops were quickly streaming toward the waiting helicopters. We knew that at any moment, the Vietcong might break through the clearing and kill us too. But not one pilot lost his nerve. Not one helicopter left the clearing.

Instead, we waited tensely until the rescue teams returned one-by-one, carrying the dead. The crewmen loaded them aboard the choppers. Despite increasingly urgent warnings from overhead, we stayed until the entire platoon was recovered and the search teams were safely on board.

Only then did we “gun” the engines and lift off, into the air, with groundfire hitting some of the helicopters as they flew away.

It was a somber moment. No one spoke as the helicopters circled higher and higher until they reached the ARVN base on the mountaintop. One-by-one, the helicopters landed briefly, and the crew gently passed down the bodies of the dead soldiers. The soldiers’ wives and daughters waited on the mountaintop, praying that their men had somehow escaped.

But none of them survived. I’m haunted by the horrified screams of wives and daughters identifying battered bodies of loved ones among the dead. Husbands and fathers—returning home for the last time. Vietnamese families paid a heavy price in the fight for freedom.

We flew out of Chu Lai. Sometimes, I went to the small village near the airbase with another pilot. A young shopkeeper named An Mai became my friend. She was just a nice girl with a small shop along the trail.

I’d flown 269 combat missions, when they asked for a volunteer to fight on the ground as a Forwarded Air Controller. I took the deadly assignment with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment. But before my departure, I returned to the village and told An Mai that I was leaving.

She walked slowly back to the base with me. When we reached the barbed wire fence surrounding the airbase, I turned to say goodbye. I knew that I would never see her again.

It broke my heart when An Mai looked up at me with tears in her eyes and said, “You go, I die.” I never saw her again, but sometimes I pray for her as I think back on the sadness of war and the suffering of those precious people I knew.

As years have passed, American veterans of the Vietnam War came to be respected and their sacrifices appreciated. But outside their own communities, soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam were largely overlooked.

When I was elected to the Senate, I felt it was time to recognize their sacrifices too. In 2013, I held a series of meeting with high-ranking officials of the Republic of Vietnam. Together, we carefully summarized the achievements of the South Vietnamese soldiers and the tragic aftermath of the war.

With the help of Senator Toddy Puller, whose husband was terribly wounded by a landmine in Vietnam, I enlisted most of the senate as cosponsors and forced the Senate Rules Committee to revive the resolution after it was killed in committee. The resolution passed the Senate unanimously and passed the House by a wide margin. I'd like to summarize it for you now:

#### SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 455

Introduced by Senator Dick Black, designating April 30 of each year as South Vietnamese Recognition Day in Virginia.

WHEREAS, South Vietnamese Americans, a proud, industrious people, make up the fourth-largest group of Asian Americans in the United States; and

WHEREAS, a South Vietnamese mass immigration to the United States began when communist tyranny swept the former Republic of Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in 1975; and

WHEREAS, to the very end, soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) fought valiantly, defending their freedom with skill, daring, and gallantry; the ARVN 3rd Cavalry Regiment, for example, demonstrated such skill and heroism in battle that it was awarded the coveted United States Presidential Unit Citation; and

WHEREAS, nearly 60,000 American fighters died in the Vietnam War and some 224,000 South Vietnamese troops also fell defending their nation; and

WHEREAS, although the American sacrifice in Vietnam was enormous, some of the most bitter combat—including the savage warfare after the United States' withdrawal—was shouldered principally by our South Vietnamese allies; and

WHEREAS, the 1968 communist Tet Offensive was designed to crack South Vietnam's will to resist, instead, South Vietnamese forces fought ferociously, and

not a single unit collapsed or ran; indeed, even the police fought, turning pistols against heavily armed enemy regulars; and

WHEREAS, together with American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, the ARVN decimated the indigenous Viet Cong guerrillas, eliminating them as an effective fighting force for the remainder of the war; and

WHEREAS, most American units had left Vietnam by 1972, yet South Vietnamese units continued to perform remarkably well; with limited American help, they defeated North Vietnam's all-out Easter Offensive, a massive conventional invasion led by Soviet T-54 tanks; and

WHEREAS, the Easter Offensive victory helped force North Vietnam to accept a negotiated end to the war; and

WHEREAS, sadly, in 1974 the United States withdrew most military support, including air power, severely restricting the flow of fuel and munitions to the ARVN; strangled by a lack of supplies, tanks and artillery pieces were allotted meager quantities of ammunition—sometimes just a few shells per day—and radios often had no batteries; and

WHEREAS, the strangulation of South Vietnamese supply lines destroyed morale and decimated combat power, making it impossible for even the bravest South Vietnamese troops to effectively defend against the final invasion by North Vietnamese soldiers; North Vietnam remained well-supplied by its communist allies in China and the Soviet Union; and

WHEREAS, everyone with ties to the Americans or the government of the Republic of Vietnam feared the threatened communist reprisals; as communist forces overran the South during the spring of 1975, 125,000 key South Vietnamese personnel were airlifted from South Vietnam to refugee centers in the United States; and

WHEREAS, as American troops and embassy staff were evacuated by waiting aircraft, terrified South Vietnamese mothers thrust their babies into the hands of complete strangers, hoping their offspring might somehow survive the approaching bloodbath; and

WHEREAS, the promised reign of terror quickly emerged, and the South Vietnamese desperately fled the murderous tyranny of the communists; roughly

two million South Vietnamese fled to escape North Vietnam's promised "people's paradise"; and

WHEREAS, launching small, crowded sampans, many South Vietnamese sailed into the vast, treacherous waters of the South China Sea, where hundreds of thousands drowned in the escape attempt; the South Vietnamese continued to flee their country in huge numbers from 1975 until the mid-1980s; and

WHEREAS, beginning in 1975 and for decades afterwards, well over one million South Vietnamese—especially former military officers and government employees—were imprisoned in communist concentration camps; these were euphemistically called "reeducation camps," where many thousands of South Vietnamese were "educated" to their deaths; and

WHEREAS, the communist concentration camps were characterized by brutal forced labor, political indoctrination, and deadly assignments like human mine clearing; there were no formal charges or trials; and

WHEREAS, the conditions in the camps were so savage that many surviving inmates estimate that almost a third of the prisoners of war died while in captivity; and

WHEREAS, South Vietnamese immigration to the United States peaked in 1992 when, after decades of torture, many concentration camp survivors were finally released and sponsored by their families to come to this country; and

WHEREAS, after persevering through unimaginable brutality and suffering, the South Vietnamese who escaped their homeland demonstrated admirable talent and intellect; they became an entrepreneurial, upwardly mobile group, whose poverty rate rapidly declined after their arrival in the United States; and

WHEREAS, today, 82 percent of the South Vietnamese in the United States are native-born or naturalized citizens, an exceptionally high portion of American citizenship for any immigrant group; and

WHEREAS, for several decades, South Vietnamese American patriots have contributed to the United States with intellect, skill, loyalty, and determination; many have served proudly in the Armed Forces of the United States; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED by the Senate, the House of Delegates concurring, That the General Assembly designate April 30, in 2013 and in each succeeding year, as South Vietnamese Recognition Day in Virginia; and, be it

RESOLVED FURTHER, That the Clerk of the Senate transmit a copy of this resolution to the Virginia Asian Chamber of Commerce and the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans so that the members of these organizations may be apprised of the sense of the General Assembly of Virginia in this matter; and, be it

RESOLVED FINALLY, That the Clerk of the Senate post the designation of this day on the General Assembly's website.

Signed, Susan Clarke Shar, Clerk of the Senate

When Senate Resolution 455 was passed, I looked up to the Senate Gallery and saw a sea of joyous Vietnamese, decked out in gold and red—the colors of the Republic of Vietnam.

And as I waived at the crowd, I thought how pleased An Mai might have been to see her countrymen honored in this way.

May God bless you and all the great people of the Republic of Vietnam.

SENATOR DICK BLACK