

Southern Museum of Flight, 2 Nov 2017
Brigadier General (Ret) Bob Stewart
Keynote speaker, *Personal Leadership for Patriots*

Thank you to everyone who had a hand in putting together this celebration of our veterans, and especially to Bob Barefield, for allowing me to speak to you this evening. We are here to honor veterans, and so my subject for tonight is soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coast guardsmen who risk their lives to defend our nation.

I do feel somewhat like I am singing to the choir tonight because there are so many veterans here, but I want to talk about just who we veterans are because I have found that there are some pretty weird ideas out there in the general public concerning the armed services and the men and women who serve. I don't understand this. We are all civilians when we sign on to our respective outfits, and we are all civilians again when we leave. But as for me, there can never again be a time when I am not also a soldier. My thoughts, my allegiances were forged in the skies over Vietnam. Well, not very far into the skies since I have been known to come back with grass in my skids and blood on my windshield. But these are matters best discussed over a beer with people who really know the subject because they have done the same thing.

Those of us who are on the older side remember when Veterans Day was called Armistice Day, because it was at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 that the guns of WWI, fell silent. It was the war to end all wars. Guess that didn't work out too well did it. Nor is there any reason to expect that mankind will ever eliminate the insanity of war, though we do seem very clever in

redesigning it. In the words of English philosopher John Stuart Mill: ***“War is a terrible thing, but not the worst of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which holds that nothing is worth war, is worse. A man who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing he cares about more than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free unless made and kept so through the efforts of better men than himself.”***

I think it is safe to say that we veterans can count ourselves among those better men, though we are by no means the only ones. But there is an undeniably special bond between veterans, especially those who actually served in combat, which the average citizen finds it hard to understand. It boils down to this: It is very comforting to be in the company of a group of people in whom you can place absolute trust. It is easy for anyone to say, “I’ve got your back,” but the combat soldier actually demonstrates that fact day in and day out. It makes life in combat tolerable regardless of how much remaining life the Lord has allotted to each of us. Sometimes it is seconds, for others it is years.

Warriors fight because, as Mill wrote, we believe that there are things much more important than ourselves. For this country’s warriors that thing is the IDEA that is the United States of America, the idea that freedom and personal liberty are worth any sacrifice. That idea is codified in our Constitution and it is to that document that we pledge our loyalty.

I really miss that ole Constitution now that we aren’t using it any more. But we had a good run. Thomas Jefferson

figured it would be good for about 50 years, until the public learned that they could raid the treasury, and boy have they ever learned that! I think we veterans can be called patriots, which Mark Twain defined as, “Someone who supports his country at all times and his government when it deserves it.”

Though he was not a soldier himself William Shakespeare captured the bond that unites us in his play Henry V when, just before the battle of Agincourt, Henry says (the short version) *...he which hath no stomach to this fight, Let him depart; his passport shall be made, And crowns for convoy put into his purse; We would not die in that man's companyBut we in it shall be remembered – We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.*

Just look at this “band of brothers” here tonight. We’re not a very pretty bunch on the outside, and it may embarrass many to know that more poetry has been written about people like us and the things we have done than any other subject; It speaks of incredible bravery **“Forward the Light Brigade. Charge for the guns!” he said. Into the valley of death rode the six hundred.**

It speaks of pain in the language and gallows humor that only a combat soldier can understand. **“I shan’t forget the night when I dropped behind the fight with a bullet where my belt plate should have been”** And it speaks of a common phenomena. We combat veterans have historically been discarded and forgotten when our duty is done. **“For it’s Tommy this and Tommy that and “Chuck him out the brute”. But it’s savior of his country when the guns begin to shoot; And it’s Tommy this and Tommy that and anything you please.**

An' Tommy ain't a bloomin fool – you bet that Tommy sees.”

I thank God that this generation of warriors has not been forgotten and that the American public once again is honoring the sacrifice of all of her warriors. It's not that we veterans, particularly those of us who have experienced combat, seek to be self serving, but we don't deserve to be forgotten either. Every freedom we enjoy, freedom which is the envy of everyone the world over, except those who would be our masters, was purchased at great cost by veterans. Father Dennis O'Brian, a Marine Corps Chaplain wrote these words:

It was the Veteran, not the reporter,
who has given us freedom of the press.

It was the Veteran, not the poet,
who has given us freedom of speech.

It was the Veteran, not the lawyer,
who has given us the right to a fair trial.

It was the Veteran, not the campus organizer,
who has given us the right to demonstrate.

It is the Veteran who salutes the flag.
Who served under the flag.
Whose coffin is draped by the flag.
Who allows the protester to burn the flag.

Having been a soldier for 28 years, and having left blood on a foreign battlefield, I feel I have the right to a little self

analysis of soldiers in general, particularly in light of what I believe is a public misperception of us.

I suppose that many would say we are pessimists rather than optimists. It's not true. It's just that we are forced to view the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. We really see no reason to suppose that man will ever morally advance to the point where he will no longer resort to violence, and I think we have millennia of data to support that supposition. We much prefer that violence to take place outside our country, out of range of those we love. A soldier doesn't fight because he hates the enemy in front of him; he fights because he loves those behind him and those fighting beside him.

We tend to be more practically oriented than philosophical, even though we may be called on to die for the philosophical idea of freedom. We don't believe that disarmament for any nation is anything other than a pipe dream. And we have seen and we remember that whenever the US tries that old "swords into plow shears" thing, we just stand by to lose another generation of young Americans. We do believe that Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus was right when in the 4th century he wrote, "Si vis pacem, para bellum" – "If you want peace, prepare for war." We believe that timely use of overwhelming force can avoid the horror of total war such as our two World Wars and save lives on both sides. WE believe it, we just wish some others in Washington did also. Maybe President Trump does believe it. I loved that part of his speech to the UN where he stated that if North Korea attacked us or our allies, we would "utterly destroy" North Korea.

It has always been a mystery to me why many persist in accusing the US Armed Forces of being “warmongers.” In the US, and in virtually all nations who have advanced beyond the 14th century, the armed forces are controlled by the civilian government. And that is at it should be. But in the 1800’s Karl von Clausewitz wrote; **“The subordination of the military to civilian control rests on the natural and unavoidable assumption that (political leaders) know the instrument (they) intend to use.”** Do you really think our leaders today live up to that caution?

In the recent past, a US President and my own government have tried to label me and you as a possible terrorist!!

Do our citizens know their own military? No more that 1% do! That is the number of Americans who have served. By the way, that percentage approaches 100% of the men in Switzerland! And once their term of service is over, those men are **REQUIRED** to retain their weapons and be ready for short notice call up to defend their country. Maybe that is the reason no one has invaded Switzerland! William Tecumseh Sherman reminds us of a principle which has been ignored since the end of WWII: **“Armies do not make war on armies: nations make war on nations.”** If we go to war, it should be as a nation, like we did in WWII, not as a bunch of poor misguided people like me who were too stupid to get out of serving. At least that is the view our liberal college students and professors have of our soldiers who fought in Vietnam. Here is the truth: in WWII 67% of the soldiers were drafted: in Vietnam 67% of the soldiers volunteered. And of the 33% who were drafted, 10% of those volunteered for the draft. Guess a

lot of us are just too stupid to get out of serving our country. And as to the other great LIE, that Vietnam was a poor minority man's war, in virtually every statistic of combat, the numbers almost perfectly reflect the makeup of our nation as a whole.

The armed forces do not choose against whom we go to war; the civilian officials, whom we ALL elect, do that for us, sometimes wisely and sometimes extremely foolishly. A moment's thought would lead a rational person to realize that, in the words of Douglas McArthur, **“The soldier above all prays for peace, for it is he who must suffer the deepest wounds of war.”**

But while we lead the pack in praying for peace, and while I longed desperately to leave Vietnam and return to my wife and daughter, when I did go home I felt that I was in some way abandoning my friends. I was sure that without my leadership, they would screw things up and get hurt. Never mind that I trained my replacement and had confidence in his ability, they needed me and I abandoned them. Then I got a letter from one of my guys telling what a great job Bobby Oslin was doing. I got my feelings hurt but I no longer suffered from the abandonment complex.

No combat veteran suffers from the “Roy Rogers” complex that civilians seem to adore, especially politicians and liberal “news reporters”. We would never think of shooting the gun out of our enemy's hand then throwing away our own to keep the fight “fair”. One of the rules familiar to any combat veteran is: “If you ever find yourself in a fair fight, your tactics suck!” We deal in real life and death, not the Hollywood version. In the immortal words of Gen George S. Patton, **“You don't win wars by dying for your**

country. You win by making the other poor SOB die for his.” The job of combat units is to kill the enemy and blow things up! I know that type of talk shocks and maybe offends some of you, but until you have actually been faced with the choice of whether your enemy dies or you do, you will never be able to understand. In the real world, where the blood and pain and death of the battlefield permeate every pore of your body, “fair” is not part of the vocabulary. We prefer to stack every advantage on our side. My only concern at days end was did I accomplish my mission with the absolute minimum damage to my soldiers. I’ve never lost a minute’s sleep worrying about the other side, though I very much respected the Vietnamese people. I’ll bet that most of them didn’t want to be where they were any more than I wanted to be where I was.

In spite of our willingness to fight with extreme violence, we believe that mankind ought to be able to manage the affairs of the world without blowing it up. This is the only place we have to live and grow our crops and raise our children.

We like active lifestyles. We prefer to live in an orderly society and find that orderliness liberating rather than oppressive. I never wasted a single brain cell worrying about what to wear to work! We derive pleasure from the mastery of complex skills. I was an astronaut and an experimental test pilot, and I believe those skills are worthy of the title “complex”. Just take a look inside an Abrams tank or the fire control center of an artillery battery and you will see what I mean, also while you are looking note that there is no “reset button” like there is on your

video games. Or imagine that your final exam in your bomb disposal class really might be a “final exam”.

Our decisions tend to be binary, yes or no, and then we act on that decision. Maybe it's because our “worldview” comes from looking at our enemy over the sights of a weapon. We do not have the option of being 85% sure we should pull the trigger, we cannot convene a “focus group” for a vote, it's a solo 100% yes or 100% no, and we live or die by that decision. And it IS a DECISION which we must make because we are warriors, not trigger happy morons. Civilian society seems to take care of the “trigger happy moron” quota. Maybe “moron” is too harsh, after all, they do shoot up schools where they know there will be no one to shoot back. We soldiers often must exercise great restraint. In Vietnam, I refused to fire a single round in Long Xuyuen province, even if fired on myself, even while flying gun escort for the Secretary of Defense, because anyone who returned fire in that province was more likely to destroy the peace that was unique to that province in all of Vietnam.

Our thought processes tend to cut to the heart of a matter precisely because we do not have the time for lengthy debate. As the deputy commanding general of the Army Strategic Defense Command, there were times when I thought my people were trying to “brief me to death”. No one can ever know everything. We gather data that is sufficient for a decision and do not worry about things that do not effect the decision. In mathematics, my undergraduate major, these are called necessary and sufficient conditions. How do I know what these conditions are? I don't have the foggiest notion, I just know. It is the sum total of who I am; what I have seen and done. It is

just as clear as if someone turned on a light whether on the battlefield or in the boardroom. If you want to know any more about this phenomena, read Malcome Gladwell's book "Blink".

As you might surmise, we do not do committees well. Bear in mind that a camel is a horse designed by a committee.

We cannot abide indecision. We live by the old Navy adage: The rudder doesn't work unless the ship is in motion. DO SOMETHING! If it's wrong, then adjust course as soon as it becomes evident. I just wish Congress would heed that last part. There are two sins in this respect: failure to initiate action; and failure to change the direction once it becomes obvious that the action undertaken is not the correct one. Otherwise you might have to "pass the bill to see what's wrong with it", then fail to fix the problem.

In the profession of arms every man and woman who has taken the oath to preserve and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, has entered into an Unlimited Liability Contract. On any given day, any of us might be required to lay down our life for a fellow soldier, and when that time comes, we will not think in the abstract terms of freedom and liberty that drove us into the profession in the beginning. We will do it for the person fighting beside us, for the men who fought the nations wars before us. In Viet Nam, my daily concern was "Would I measure up to the high standards of courage that my dad and uncle's and you gentlemen who fought WWII, bequeathed to me."

I have had a weird career for an Army officer. What could be better than being an astronaut? I tell people that my

combat experience in Vietnam was my most rewarding career achievement. It was because I could, without a moment's hesitation, place my life in the hands of my fellow soldiers, and they could place that same trust in me. We did it day in and day out.

You know, we are all just penciled in on this planet. None of us are going to get out of it alive. We are experiencing a tragic loss with the passing of the WWII generation of men that have seen first hand the worst that humanity can offer. They have personally experience the events that some people today, young and old, refuse to accept as historical fact. I believe that as soon as that first hand knowledge is gone, we are setting the stage to repeat the experience. We have seen it begin already with the holocaust deniers. And if our educational system persists in the failure to explain the founding principles of the United States of America, and what it has taken to establish and defend those ideas, we will be greasing the skids in a downward spiral that I believe we have already begun. A British journalist, certainly not one of our own, wrote that America is the author and protector of individual freedom in this world. And if we ever fail in protecting that individual liberty, then it will forever vanish from the face of the Earth. I fear it is happening now. And WHEN we finally let it slip from our grasp, it will be gone forever. But it won't be taken from us on the battlefield. It will be given away, piece at a time, by politicians who put party and re-election above what is best for the USA.

My prayer is that I am wrong, but just in case I am not, I pray that the veterans of fifty years from now will not curse us for losing the most noble of God's gifts, personal liberty, so that they had to buy it back with their blood. Thomas

Jefferson thought that such a day would come when he said that “periodically the tree of liberty must be watered by the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Are we near that time?

Thank you for inviting an old helicopter pilot to speak to you today. God bless the United States of America, and all those who remain true to her founding beliefs.