

Terry Garlock Presentation to Angry Skipper Reunion

D/2 Cav - Angry Skipper – May 17, 2014
by Terry Garlock

(introduced by Norm McDonald and then Bill Neal)

Thank you. Since Norm and Bill only revealed my minor weaknesses, I know I am among friends.

And since my Loach pilot buddy Mike King goaded Bill Neal to tell you the only thing Cobra pilots could hit was the ground, you should know that if Mike ever flew more than 20 feet of altitude he got a nosebleed.

It's an honor to be invited to speak to you for several reasons. First, grunts and helicopter pilots share a lot of history from the Vietnam War. Somewhere, right now there are helicopter pilots laughing over a beer at the memory of a ground commander whispering on the radio, "Come on in, the LZ is secure!"

If you guys are anything like helicopter pilots, you have to be careful at reunions like this because nothing ruins a good war story like an eye witness! And no matter how different our jobs were 40 years ago, our best stories seem have a punch line, like this one a Navy jet pilot told me. He said the three best things in a pilot's life are a good landing, a good bowel movement and a good orgasm, and when he landed on a carrier in rough weather at night he could have all three at the same time.

It's a privilege to speak to veterans of Angry Skipper, a proud and accomplished Cav unit in a tough war.

It's also a special treat to spend a little time with old friends like Bill and Carolyn Neal, and new friends like Robin Woo, Stan Dillon, and Norm McDonald. Too bad Nick Donvito couldn't make it.

Bill Neal is the guy I call when I need wisdom. Those of you who took orders from Bill might remember him as a tough guy, and you might really like the T-shirt I recently bought for a Marine friend who is rather proud to have been an enlisted man. The shirt says – "Officers – making simple shit hard since 1775."

But the truth is, if I had a son carrying a rifle in combat, I would pray for him to have a strong hands-on leader like Bill Neal.

Bill told you I was "chumming" last week when our Vietnam vet group went out to the Gulf Stream on a bouncy day, but in case you missed his meaning, I was the weak sister on that boat, and while they hauled in Tuna, Mahi-Mahi, Wahoo and a Sailfish, I was puking my guts out all day long. I thought I was going to barf up my toenails and I am downright tickled to be here on stable, dry land.

I flew cobras with the Dragons in the 334th Attack helicopter company based in Bien Hoa in III Corps in 1969. When grunts called for help and we were scrambled, things were usually exciting when we arrived. My platoon leader, John Synowsky, had a radio call style intended to calm the ground commander:

Red Eagle 6, this is Dashing, Daring, Debonair, Devil-May-Care, Death-Defying Dragon 34, lead element of a fire team of cobras whose fire power can only be surpassed by a flight of B-52s, give me a sitrep, over.

Dragon 34, we're getting hurt down here and you're having fun?

Now that I have your attention Red Eagle 6, mark your position and give me direction and distance to place my fire. No such thing as left and right, smoke, direction and distance and we'll fire them up for you, over.

John liked to use the same style to screw with the tower operator when we returned to base at Bien Hoa:

Spartan tower, this is Dashing, Daring, Debonair, Devil-May-Care, Death-Defying Dragon 34, lead element of a fire team of cobras whose fire power can only be surpassed by a flight of B-52s, back from kicking Charlie's butt, weapons are cold, turning on final for lane 5, over.

If the tower operator was new, he probably would say, "Now who are you again?" and if he had heard it a bunch of times before, he might say "Yeah, so what Dragon 34?" but either way, by then we had already hit the pad and were hovering to our revetment to park for re-arm and refuel.

Now I'll get serious and tell you some things from deep in my heart, so if I struggle, bear with me.

Like every other helicopter pilot who flew in Vietnam, I have felt the love many times from grunts like you expressing gratitude for slicks coming through a bad situation to take you out of a lousy place, or gunships like mine coming to put our fire where you needed it.

When I was a new guy in Vietnam I used to wonder as I watched 20 year old pilots fly into a firefight, "What motivates young men to take such risks?" I soon discovered the answer was you guys, grunts on the ground, our brothers.

You were the ones doing America's dirtiest and hardest work. You were the ones down there in thick jungle that made a Klick seem like 10 miles. You were the ones down there with the bugs and snakes, the oppressive heat and humidity, never mind the booby traps and enemy trying to kill you before you killed them. You were our motivation to climb in the cockpit after a bad day. When we call you grunts, it is truly a term of endearment.

It's my privilege to be here with you even if I don't know you. I used to wonder why I will always feel isolated, like a stranger around people even if I have known them a long time. And yet, when I walk into a room full of Vietnam combat vets I have never met, it feels like coming home, like I can relax in the comfort of knowing every one of them will watch my six. I'll bet some of you feel the same way, even though it's hard to explain.

There are a lot of things about us hard to explain. Some of the wives in this room might observe that combat veterans should come with a detailed owner's manual explaining all of our quirks, warning lights and hot buttons, but the truth is we don't even understand ourselves. Someone once said combat is a struggle to survive, and if you do, then you spend the rest of your life dealing with it.

Between 2005 and 2010 I was writing a book about Vietnam vets and I spoke to a great many of them. Listening carefully helped me see more clearly how we were changed by war. The more I listened to guys who didn't understand themselves, the more I understood about myself. The things I learned are pretty much the same, I think, for pilots like me and for grunts like you.

How were we prepared for combat when we were so young? Intense training and drilling helped a lot because every one of us was worried about measuring up, wondering if we were made of the right stuff.

When the time came and the shooting started, new guys were too busy doing their job to notice they were learning lessons that are not taught any other place.

We thought we would be fighting for the flag, but it turned out we were fighting for each other

We thought courage was not being afraid, but we found out courage is doing your job well while you are scared to death.

Combat is a cruel teacher, but somehow it turns a group of men into a sort of family where you may not like or even know a guy but you'll take breathtaking risks in the struggle to keep each other alive.

Amidst the chaos and danger of combat, beyond the mission there is powerful motivation that I think is summed up in two words – honor and trust.

What does a 19 year old soldier in combat know about honor? Quite a bit, I think. He may not ever put it into words but he knows honor is doing his job well and defending his brothers even at the risk of his life. He knows while looking in the mirror to shave whether he met the challenge. Passing that test becomes what he likes most about himself.

As he gets good at his job, at some point he realizes his brothers trust him to deliver, even under fire. He may never say it, but he is enormously proud of earning that trust, and he would do anything not to lose it.

It's almost like we proudly wore an invisible jacket of honor and trust that we had to earn, a high achievement that our family at home would never understand. The complete trust we had in each other made a closeness that only Shakespeare has successfully described.

And so, even though everyone in combat fears dying, we feared even more that our courage might fail us, that we might screw up, fail to do our job, and we might lose our brothers trust or even lose their lives, and we feared that more than anything.

If you asked us back then if we loved each other, we would have thought you were out of your mind. But when one of us was killed the cut ran very deep, and we did what soldiers have to do, we crammed our anguish way down deep inside us into our own secret box and we closed the lid tight so we could carry on to do our job . . . and the ghosts of our dead brothers were always close by.

The calendar days passed in Vietnam, some days boring, some days exciting and some dark with anguish, and we all fantasized about going home, getting away from the nastiness of war and back to those we loved.

We may have left home as boys but we would return home more serious men who had learned to instinctively separate the fluff from important things that might get our brothers killed or keep them alive.

When we finally arrived home the reunion might not have been as smooth as we expected since we had changed more than we realized. We may have seemed remote to some people since our brothers, whether alive or hidden away dead in our secret box, meant far more to us than the dumbasses we met who would never sacrifice a thing for their country and wouldn't know honor if we spelled it for them.

It didn't seem right that life went on as if there was no war, as if Americans were not still fighting and dying, and we found ourselves missing our brothers, the people we respected now, the people who understood us now, the people we trusted completely now to watch our back.

How crazy is it that many of us secretly wished to be back with those guys where honor and trust are the coin of the realm? Maybe we hated the war but felt the urge to be there again with the ones who were part of us now.

Over the years, we have been cautious about opening our secret box to tell others about our dead brothers because the memories are wrapped in the same feelings we had when they died, just as fresh as yesterday, and we didn't like that we couldn't control the tears and overwhelming sadness.

A few years ago when my daughter, Melanie was 13, I was driving her up to Virginia to visit Bill Neal for some fishing, and we made a side trip to Washington, DC. I told her we had little

time, so what two things did she want to see? She said the Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam Memorial.

I was proud of her and said I wanted to explain something about the Vietnam Memorial, what makes it so powerful.

As I drove the freeway I asked her, "When a mother and father are informed their son has been killed in a war, and they suffer the worst day of their life, how long do you think it takes for them to get over it?" After a moment's thought Melanie said, "Never."

I told her, "Exactly right. They take that anguish and do the same thing that soldiers do in combat when bad things happen - they push it down into a secret box deep inside them and close the lid tight so they can go on with life."

I told her about two names I would show her at The Wall, Paul and Ralph. We were Cobra gunship pilots in the war, and our worst nightmare was being trapped in the cockpit after a crash and still conscious while spilled fuel burned it fast and hot, a horrible way to die.

Paul was my roommate. He obsessed about his wife pregnant with their first child. He was on top of the world when he received a telegram saying he was a Dad, he had a son.

Four days later Paul and Ralph were supporting the 3rd Mobile Strike Force, Green Berets, trying to stop an enemy force crossing the Cambodian border into South Vietnam from the southernmost finger of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They lost a firefight with a .51 anti-aircraft gun and died a violent death in the cockpit when the aircraft hit the jungle trees at high speed, stuck and burned about 200 feet up.

Three of the Green Berets volunteered to rappel down from a hovering helicopter to retrieve bodies. They got Paul's body out of the front seat but the aircraft was burning and ammo starting to cook off. They couldn't get to Ralph in the back seat and made a radio call for permission to "cap" him because he was trapped with no hope of getting out, alive and conscious, burning and screaming.

I learned of this radio request years later while talking to the 3rd Mobile Strike Force radio operator. He said the answer was "No," and it was a stupid request anyway because what officer would want that on his record? They should have just done the deed, and I like to think they did it anyway.

As I was telling Melanie this story and still driving, I had opened my own secret box and had tears streaming down my face while she patted my shoulder and said, "Don't cry, Dad"

I told Melanie, "When I show you Paul's and Ralph's name on The Wall, you might remember some of the things I have told you, but you will never feel the things I feel, and for me . . . it will never go away. That is the power of the Vietnam Memorial. It comes from within the people who were involved."

The names etched on the polished black wall make it personal, and as family members and brothers in arms approach The Wall, the air becomes electric as memories wrapped in anguish fly out of secret boxes, finally set loose to run free.

We can almost see our dead brothers in the reflection of that polished wall, proudly wearing the jacket of honor and trust they earned.

The Wall in Washington is our place to ease the pressure, to let loose those feelings we suppress, where we can talk to our dead brothers to tell them they are not forgotten, that we are teaching our children and grandchildren about them. It's a place where we can confess our guilt that we lived through it and they did not, that they never knew the joy of watching children and grandchildren grow up.

These are some of the things that bind our brotherhood together, whether we were grunts or pilots, nurses or POWs, sailors or Marines. We may have lived in different worlds in Vietnam 40 years ago, but our shared history will always draw us to each other. The draw is much more, I think, than remembering the past and swapping laughs and stories.

I think it's the comfort of being with men and women who proved themselves worthy of honor and trust, people who did hard things well when they were young, people who understand when we say we can almost see the ghosts of our dead brothers here among us, laughing and joking, sipping with us when we drink a toast to them and say our prayers in silence for them.

Memorial Day is coming soon, and the dumbass half of America will enjoy the holiday weekend with nary a thought to the sacrifice that makes them free. The other half will wave the flag and make speeches honoring the fallen, but those who weren't there can never fully understand how we think of our dead brothers.

Those of us who lived through it will remember them vividly for the rest of our lives. Some of us think of them every day, as if we're keeping an unspoken pledge to each other – I will remember you.

I am thankful I had the chance long ago to bring close air support to men like you, and if I had it to do over again, even knowing I would be shot down and badly injured, not for anything would I miss the chance to fly with the greatest bunch of cowboys in the world.

I am grateful for the brotherhood we have, even though I came to it late in life after ignoring it for 30 years – now it seems to pull stronger on me with every passing year. I am grateful for the remembrances of Memorial Day, even though you and I don't reserve those memories for one day a year. We think of each other and we think of our dead brothers all the time with the affection of this old Irish blessing:

*May the road rise up to meet you
May the wind always be at your back
May the sun shine warm on your face*

*May the rains fall soft on your fields
And until we meet again
May God hold you in the palm of His hand*