

Vincent Tedesco, Lessons I Have Learned
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Good afternoon, my brothers and the family and friends of my brothers. I have given a lot of speeches over the years. This one I have looked forward to more than just about any one I have ever given because every time I come here and am amongst you all, I truly understand love more than I can tell you.

The 44th Regiment and How You Can Help

If you heard the bio, I am an honorary commander of the 44th regiment. That is a tremendous honor, and it allows me to stay in touch with the 44th. For those of you who know, the 44th is now in Texas and is a Patriot unit. It's gone back and forth to do Patriot jobs overseas.

The 2/44 battalion has its home base at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and a month ago I went to say goodbye to the 2/44. That battalion is now serving in Afghanistan. It is spread out over Afghanistan doing a job of teaching basic soldiering skills to the Afghan army and the Afghan police force. There are E-5 and E-6 led groups spread out over 29 different locations. It sounds so familiar---just like the Quad 50 guys, and I told them that when I saw them a month ago. It is spread out in groups with great non-commissioned officers leading. It's the kind of job we have always done, and that's what these kids are doing now. Some of these kids are on their third or fourth rotation.

All of a sudden, I am with a Captain Hewlett who is the adjutant of the battalion, and he is walking me over to where the parade is so I don't get lost. He tells me he is about ready to retire because he had been an E-6 before he went to OCS. I said, "That means you're going to retire and not deploy?" He says, "Oh no. I'm going." It was his fourth time, and he could easily have opted out.

So that's what's going on with the 44th, and the reason I bring that up is because as a commander of the 44th regiment, I have the privilege of appointing people as honorary members of the regiment. I would like to invite all of you, not just the men here of the 44th, to join with me in being honorary members of the 44th regiment. Now I am doing it for two reasons. One, because I want to continue the brotherhood, and right now, to the best of my knowledge, the other units in this room do not have active regiments. Second, because I need your commitment, and why do I need your commitment? Remember that if any of these kids overseas from the 2/44 get hurt, I am going to know about it.

I am going to need men and women throughout the United States who would go visit a family and ask them if they are alright. Ask them if there is something that can be done for them. I can go to Walter Reed because I live reasonably close to there, but I can't do San Antonio very easily. I can't do some of the other hospitals very easily. So, I need your commitment because if you sign up, you may get a phone call. If you're interested in joining the regiment as an honorary member, please see my wife and give her your name. Let us know a place that I can get hold of you. I can guarantee you that until you have gone to Walter Reed and seen some of these kids, you haven't seen what war can do or know how much you can help.

What's interesting is seeing the men over a period of months from the initial shock from when they get there and realize they don't have a leg or arm. In six or seven months later, they're smiling, and they're happy. We went to the hospital with my oldest son who commanded a battalion in Rymadi in 2006. We went to see one of his sergeants who had been there for three or four months, and he was just

sort of down. He was down for good reason as he was paralyzed from the waist down. What a surprise when one day I walked in, and he was smiling. It's the first time I saw the guy smile, and I said, "What's going on?" He said, "I moved my toes." I am not saying you are all going to get that rewarding of an experience. What I am saying is that if you sign up, be prepared for a phone call.

The Air Defense Museum

The Air Defense Museum was in Fort Bliss, Texas, but the branch has been moved to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. None of us like it, but it's what the Army said, so it's happened. They're going to build a new museum, but the Congress of the United States isn't sure if it wants to spend the few million dollars that it is going to cost. In the meantime, they have identified three buildings at Fort Sill, and at some point, they are going to move the museum. I guarantee you I am working very hard to make sure that the Dusters, Quads, Searchlights, Vulcan, and Hawk guys are going to be clearly well represented in that new museum. I have been able to maintain a good relationship with the branch over the years. The person who is the historian turns out to be a pretty good friend, and I think I know the one who was just hired as the curator of the museum. So, let's see what we can do, but if you're interested, don't go yet because it's not there, I will make sure and will at least let you know when it's there, and you can start visiting.

Lessons of the Nation

But none of this has to do with my talk. My talk has to do with lessons that I learned. When Suzy and I got on a plane to come down here, we landed in Atlanta. The last thing the stewardess did was to tell us about the servicemen and servicewomen who were aboard the aircraft, and everybody gave them a cheer. We landed here in Savannah. The same thing happened, but even better because as they walked off the airplane, there were people there applauding each and every service man and woman who was on that airplane.

You made that happen. The Nation learned a lesson, a tremendous lesson, in what they did to us. I didn't have it too bad to be frank with you. I wore my uniform home. I got off the plane in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My wife was there, and I went on about my life. But I know that after talking to a bunch of people, that was not always the case. I was lucky. And guess what? Every one of those kids coming back now really has you to thank, but more importantly the Nation has you to thank for realizing that they can't be doing that---to use the Italian expression---bullshit anymore. The service people who went and did their duty didn't pick what they had to go do. They just did it, and I think the nation has gotten that lesson loud and clear. You're the ones to thank, and you helped the Nation learn that lesson.

Lessons About Protecting the Troops

I also work for a defense contractor. The Nation is spending, millions if not billions of dollars, on IEDs, improvised explosive devices, known to us old people as land mines, to protect the troops so that when these things go off, the troops aren't killed or maimed. I don't know about you, but my IED protection was five sandbags in the bottom of my jeep. The Quad guys may remember they had four or five layers of sandbags in the bottom of their deuce and a halves in the beds. It's right that they are doing what they are doing. I just wish that they had gone about doing that for us, but they learned that you have to protect the troops. This is another lesson that you made sure the Nation learned.

Lessons of Brotherhood

I thought about other things that I have learned personally as a result of my service in Vietnam. The first thing is brotherhood. I played ball in high school and college. I was in the Army a couple of years before I went to Vietnam. I thought I understood brotherhood, but I didn't understand---to use another Italian expression, "crapola." Where I learned about brotherhood was in Vietnam. I quickly learned that the NVA didn't give a rat's you-know-what about whether the American was Black, white, Hispanic, or Asian---we were Americans, and they wanted to kill us equally. And when there was a firefight, all the guys would jump on the tracks and jump on the trucks and go fight to save their buddies---even though it wasn't their responsibility to get into the fight. They didn't care about who was in the fight. They just knew there were American brothers in the fight. And all of a sudden brotherhood means one hell of a lot. Essentially it means we are all brothers, and we all treat each other like brothers because that's the way it should be. The kids today are learning that lesson day in and day out. So that's one of the lessons that I learned.

Lessons of the Role of the Enlisted Man

I learned that being the officer in combat was probably the easiest job. Being an enlisted guy in combat was, I think, a lot harder. I get stories. Joe gives me stories. Every now and then Tank gives me a story. Tank doesn't say too much. Some say it's because he eats a lot and doesn't have a lot of time to speak, but I wouldn't say that. But when I sit with these guys as I come to the reunion, I hear a whole different side of combat, and I realize that I had it pretty damn easy compared to what all of you went through. I appreciate it so damn much it's unbelievable. I have done my best to try to tell other officers the same thing. You don't have to tell the non-commissioned officers. They have done that. They have been there. They understand. But sometimes the officers need to hear that and understand. It was easy for me.

Lessons For Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers

I also learned the true role of being a commissioned officer or being a non-commissioned officer. We all hear stuff about taking care of the troops and leading them up front, but it is more than that. I finally came to understand why I got extra pay, why I got a salute, and why I lived in a BOQ. It was because it was when the stuff hit the fan, I was expected to get up and set the example and lead from the front, and that's what all of that was about. For the non-commissioned officers, that also was what it was all about. I have done my best to teach two generations of air defenders that, and I think I have taught my two boys that. I realize that more and more as I thought about what it meant to be responsible for wonderful people. And God knows you are the most wonderful people I have ever met.

Lessons About Coming Home

You know, I was lucky because I stayed in the Army, so when I came back home, I was among people who were in the service just like me. Most of you weren't that lucky, and I honor you for having to endure what you had to endure. I realize how tough it must have been to come back and not receive the respect and honor that you deserve, except from your immediate family of course. That's why while we were at dinner last night, some guy on his way out stopped by and thanked us for our service. They're finally starting to recognize it. When we were at The Wall this past November 11th, a little girl came up and thanked us for our service. They're finally waking up. I don't know if we will ever be able to repay all

of you who went home and who took all the crap and had to endure in silence things what this nation owed you. I pray that at some time you will understand how the vast majority of us love you.

Lessons of a Different Brotherly Love

I also learned a lot about a different kind of brotherly love. The first thing I learned is that heroes don't look like John Wayne. The biggest chickenshit that I ever met was a Marine captain, blonde, six-two, good looking, and he was ready to bug out of that ambush which left just me and two other officers. I couldn't get over it.

One of the two of the greatest guys I ever saw was a Hispanic, Marine lieutenant with part of his jaw shot off, and he had a wrap around his head holding his face in place. He was in the same hole with the Charlie Battery guys when I got down to their track with Hardin and those guys. He was sitting there calling in artillery and air by writing a note to his radio operator, and the radio operator was calling it in. If it were me, I would have been lying there in pain. Not him. He was doing his job.

The other guy was a big, geeky looking Navy corpsman. He weighed twice as much as me. He was a little over six feet tall. He was just walking up and down the road not caring what was going on--- providing first aid to anybody who needed it. What a gutsy guy. What a man he was that day. Just a superman.

I also learned that I could really love some guys. The first on my list was John House. I don't know how many of you know John. John commanded 1/44th in 1967-68. Unfortunately, he died about a year and a half ago, and I did not know that so I didn't go to his funeral. John was one hell of a commander. I learned a lot about how to command from watching John House. Another is a platoon leader who some of you didn't like. He became like my brother, and today we are as close as brothers, and I just respect the hell out of that guy.

There was also a big first sergeant named Alex Crawford, a tall Black man in total control of himself at all times, and he talked to the troops as the "mens." You mens got to do this and you mens got to do that. I have never seen that fine a non-commissioned officer in all of my years in the service. Alex passed away a few years ago from M.S. You know why I am saying this? I am hoping that each of you has that same list in your head. I am sure you are going down that list just by looking at the people surrounding you.

Then there was a guy named Smitty. John Smith was my driver. He was my driver in headquarters battery, and then he came with me to Charlie Battery. I loved the kid. I have lost the kid. He is somewhere in the wilds of Brooklyn, New York, and I wish I could find him. Every day Smitty was there, and every day Smitty was smiling. He only got pissed off at me one time because I went into a fire fight, and I didn't bring him. That was Smitty, and I am sure you all had Smittys—great, great, wonderful people. Every time that I come to this celebration, I pray that somehow my Smitty shows up. I just want to give him a great big Italian hug and kiss him. That would embarrass the shit out of him.

There was a wonderful chaplain named Cecil Lewis. Now I am not a religious man, but Cecil Lewis was just what you expected a man of God to be. There was a time in Charlie Battery when we hadn't received mail in over 30 days. The road was closed, and they weren't running mail. Finally, I got pissed off, and I said I am going to get the mail so I got on a track. Probably one of you guys was driving the damn thing, and we started down the road. As we got to Cam Lo, the Marines had set up a barricade to prevent

traffic from going to Camp Carroll on Route 9 unless it was part of a convoy. Who is sitting there with all of our mail, driving the jeep himself but Cecil Lewis. He was coming by himself to deliver Charlie Battery's mail. That's the kind of guy Cecil Lewis is.

Another time Cecil arranged for a show to come to Dong Ha to entertain the troops. The show was three young ladies. They may have been from Korea or the Philippines, and another young lady came, I think, from Australia. They came in, and they entertained the troops. Unfortunately for Cecil, they entertained him in more ways than one (laughter). Cecil was heartbroken. I saw him the next day, and he was devastated. He said, "I just brought sin into this place (more laughter)." So how do you tell the chaplain not to be so hard on himself? Cecil Lewis. Just a wonderful, wonderful man of God.

Lessons of a Leader

I also learned about myself that I could have been a hell of a lot better leader. I remember standing on Route 9 with a LAW in my hand and needing to use it, but I didn't know how. I had to read the instructions on the LAW. That's pretty embarrassing for a captain in the United States Army. Thank God it was cracked in the casing, and one of the guys spotted the crack before I pulled the trigger.

And then there was something that didn't turn out so humorously. I think I might have been better prepared for what I was called upon to do. If I were better prepared, then Strickland would be sitting here with us this afternoon. I have to take that with me forever. There isn't much else I can do but feel terrible each and every time I think about it. I try to tell young officers that you don't want to have your own Billy Strickland. It's probably going to happen, but you don't want that.

Other Lessons for the Nation

There are hopefully some other lessons that the Nation has learned. Don't send in the U.S. Army at a half-step. It seemed that we had learned that lesson in the first Gulf War, and it seemed we learned it in 2003. We need to go in with all the technology we have. Kill the other guy and get going. We'll see how well the Nation has learned that lesson.

We'll see if this generation will have their people like Robert McNamara. Sometimes, I think they already had one of them. Now I want you to know that I salute Mr. McNamara. I am in the Pentagon at least three days a week, and whenever I get a chance, I go down the hall where they have the pictures of the secretaries of defense. And when I go by Mr. McNamara, I give him the one finger salute (laughter and applause). And I wish it were him, and not just his picture. It's funny because a couple of years ago a young lieutenant colonel was walking my way, and he saw me do it, and I try not to do it too openly. He laughed at me and said, "I got my own guy (laughter)." And I think I know who it is, but that's another story.

I also have a great deal of trouble forgiving people like Jane Fonda, and other people who thought soldiers were evil people. Soldiers were really the "goodest" people if there is such a word. But you've seen it, and I've seen it---the way we have reached out to everybody. I have even seen guys reach out to the NVA. When it comes right down to it, we are all humans. We (the troops) need to reach out---especially to little kids. Especially to helpless people like the mountain people in Vietnam, the Montagnards, who were also great soldiers. The troops in Iraq and Afghanistan are doing it right now to the poor people who live there.

True Heroes

I was lucky to serve, and I think you may feel the same way. I hope so. For me it was a defining time in my life. I was doing something that was very important. But most important, I was honored to do it in the company of men of greatness, and that's each and every one of you, and I mean that with all my heart. Every time that I am among you, I know who the true heroes are, and I am proud to be with you. I hope to see you again, and I thank you very much for offering this opportunity to talk to you because I love you.