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Vietnam veteran air defenders donate memorial

By Marie Berberera, Fort Sill August 15, 2013



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Fort Sill, Okla. (Aug. 15, 2013) -- The National Dusters, Quads and Searchlight Association donated a memorial to Fort Sill's Constitution Park, during an unveiling ceremony Aug. 9.

Retired Col. Vincent Tedesco stood before a crowd of his peers and predecessors, and described what it was like to fight as an air defender in Vietnam.

"Bravery was just so commonplace it was amazing," said Tedesco. "When you look at those guys over there now with the beards and the bellies and having trouble walking, try to go back 45 years. They were lean, mean fighting machines. Most of them drafted. They did not ask to fight in this most unpopular war, but they knew their country had called them to service, and it was their duty to serve."

Maj. Gen. Mark McDonald, Fires Center of Excellence and Fort Sill commanding general, explained to the audience how the air defenders were so effective at shutting down the sky to the enemy that they were actually called upon to defend against the enemy on the ground, becoming a close combat asset.

"When the enemy pressed their attack at night, the Dusters, the Quads, and particularly the Searchlights, were the prime target of their attack," said McDonald. "Events like today have set the record straight of the fantastic service that you gave your country at a very difficult time. You're the heroes of our nation and we thank you."

MEMORIAL DEDICATION

The memorial includes a statue of an eagle, six benches representing the five battalions and others in theater, and a slab with the 209 fallen air defenders' names on it. The memorial planning was called "Operation Eagle," which was set in motion in March 2011, when the National Dusters, Quads and Searchlight Association sponsored three Gold Star mothers on a trip to the place where their sons were killed in Vietnam.

Luke Clark bought the 6-foot marble eagle during that trip as an intended water feature for his home in Louisiana, but his wife, suggested other purposes. The two decided to donate it to the association as part of a memorial to the fallen Air Defense Artillery Soldiers.

"We wanted for a number of years very much to build a memorial for our fallen brothers," said Tedesco. "Then we raised \$70,000. A whole bunch of Lawton and Fort Sill people went out of their way to make it happen."

McDonald, other post leaders, and members of the National Dusters, Quads and Searchlight Association, unveiled the statue and slab during the ceremony. As several readers came up and recited the names of each fallen air defender, Tedesco stared at the black slate. When one name was read, he saluted.

"There's a Soldier named Strickland who's on that wall," said Tedesco. "He's dead because I did not do my job properly. And I will remember Billy Strickland forever. I should have deployed my forces better. And as a result of learning my job, Billy Strickland paid the price. So Billy Strickland has a special meaning for me and I have to salute his name. I've told his family and begged their forgiveness, and they've given it to me."

Though Strickland's death is still with him, Tedesco earned a Silver Star for saving Soldiers and Marines by leading a quick reaction force and others against enemy forces during the "Ambush on Route 9."

"When we had to take a reaction force out cause guys were ambushed, my job as a commander was to kick guys off the vehicles because everybody wanted to go," he recalled. "The cooks wanted to go, the mechanics wanted to go, the ammo handlers. Why? Because their brothers were in trouble and they wanted to go serve and help [them]. That was the typical attitude that I experienced in Vietnam."

Tedesco said having the memorial at Fort Sill is fitting as the majority of the fallen deployed as artillerymen. And, now that the Fires Center of Excellence is also the home of the air defense artillery there was no better place. Tedesco said seeing the memorial unveiled is a kind of closure for him.

"At the age of 70, I [have] a bucket list," he said. "This was number one. If, God forbid, something happened to me on the way home, I was here for this. I was here for the honoring of those wonderful men. "