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Opinion: Talking about the Vietnam War is hard, but honor its veterans

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John Turco, a U.S. Navy veteran who served in the Vietnam War, sits in front of the U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington during a trip with Honor Flight Tri-State Tuesday, Sept. 20, 2022. Honor Flight Tri-State flies veterans to the Washington D.C. area to visit the area's memorials. *Josh Morgan, USA TODAY*

Cincinnati's Vietnam Veterans Memorial is powerful in its simplicity. Two soldiers – visibly tired, quiet, and remorseful – stand over a comrade's web belt and dogtags. The memorial's inscription, "In memory of the people who served," reminds us that the men and women who fought the Vietnam War are neither nameless nor faceless; they are people.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War at the end of this month, it's more than mere words to say that while it's our privilege to honor war's stories of courage and valor, it is our responsibility to honor war's humanity.

In the 1960s and early '70s, a staggering 2.7 million American men and women served in Vietnam – more than the combined population of Ohio's 14 most southwestern counties today. In those divisive years that did not fully register in my middle school-aged brain at the time, 2.7 million human souls risked their lives fighting guerillas and insurgents in sub-tropical jungles halfway across the world.

Almost a quarter-million of those people hailed from the great state of Ohio; our Kentuckian brothers and sisters sent just under 100,000 more. Combined, 4,151 of those service members lost their lives in combat. Countless more returned carrying the physical and mental scars of war; many still carry them today.

My father is one of our nation's Vietnam-era service members. He enlisted in the Army just a few years after the Korean War's Armistice Agreement was signed, and as a mid-grade noncommissioned officer, he later deployed to fight during two of the Vietnam War's deadliest years for American soldiers.

Not long into his first tour, he faced nearly impossible odds when well-protected enemy fighters ambushed his squad. My father charged through gunfire five times to recover and save the lives of six wounded teammates, then led a flanking maneuver to kill their ambushers and capture their weapons.

His Silver Star award citation begins with the phrase, "For gallantry in action against a hostile force," but my sisters and I never heard him describe his actions as "gallant." Despite his 35-year career to the top of the Army's enlisted ranks, our father did not talk about combat at home.

Decades later, through my own 38-year Army career that saw a new war claim Vietnam's mantle as America's longest, I came to understand the simple reason why: talking about war is hard. The memories are dark, the lost time stings, and too many people try to talk about the politics of war when you want to focus on the people who served at your side.

This month, on the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War's end, I will be reflecting on and praying for the people who fought it – "the people who served;" who they were before they entered service, who they became under fire, the lives lost, the lives which continued on, and the loved ones who did their best to understand a war that may have been hard to talk about.

I encourage you to take time to honor them, as well. On March 29, The Urology Group, Xavier University and numerous patriotic community partners will host a 50th Anniversary Tribute to Vietnam Veterans at the Cintas Center – a night to strike the right balance between solemnity, celebration and honor.

Most Americans today have no first-hand memories of the Vietnam War. At the Cintas Center, veterans and neighbors have an incredible opportunity to connect our younger generations with those who served, on the occasion of a major milestone. For 50 years, our brave and gallant Vietnam veterans have been living and serving throughout our communities. For some, talking about the war has been hard.

Let's welcome their voices and stories. To remember, and in memory of, the people who served.

Michael X. Garrett is a retired U.S. Army four-star general who led combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan during his 38-year military career. An Xavier University 1984 alumnus and ROTC commissionee, he continues to support the university's students and cadets.



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