

WILLBANKS REMARKS AT CLASS OF '69 VIETNAM MEMORIAL

- I am honored to be chosen to speak here today to help remember our fallen classmates and their families.
- Since the day that I was asked to speak, I have thought a lot about what to say.
- Two weeks ago, I spent five days of intense discussion with a group of scholars about the Vietnam War. During that process, it occurred to me that there was a strong connection between our class and that war.
- In many way, our class grew up with the Vietnam War:
 - We arrived on campus just a few months after the first U.S. ground troops were committed in March 1965 when the 9th Marines came ashore at Red Beach near Danang.
 - We were in our first semester as fish when the first big battle of the war was fought in the Ia Drang Valley in November 1965.
 - We witnessed from afar the bloody battles of 1966 and 1967 in the Iron Triangle, War Zones C and D, the Bong Son, the A Shau valley, Pleiku, Song Be, Loch Ninh, the Mekong delta, Con Thien, and Dak To.
 - We were juniors during the Tet Offensive of 1968, including the desperate fighting in the streets of Saigon and Hue, and at Khe Sanh – and witnessed the subsequent political backlash at home.
- While we were here on campus:
 - We went about our daily lives as students – class, midnight yell practice, football games, bonfire, beer busts, and participating in all the many other things that go into the aggie experience.
 - But the war was always with us – all over the newspapers and in living color on the 5:30 news every night (seen at the MSC, since few of us except Ralph Rayburn had a TV in our rooms).
 - Even today, when I hear what I think of in my head as the soundtrack of our time here, I hear all those great songs from the sixties, but I also hear the undertone of steady news reports about battles and casualty counts.

- In many ways, there was a shadow that silently hung over our heads as we went about our daily lives; we might not have overtly acknowledged it, but it was always there.
- And if there was any doubt that there was a real war going on in Southeast Asia, we began to hear about upper classmen, guys like Joe Bush, Layne Connevy, and Ray Smith, all of whom went to Vietnam, but did not come back.
- Meanwhile, as the fighting intensified, the war became increasingly unpopular at home – eventually, it divided the country like no other event since the civil war – almost tearing the nation apart.
- Many of our generation went into the streets to protest the war, but we continued to carry on here, where the watchwords were honor, integrity, discipline, and selfless service.
- Given that upbringing, there is no mystery why Aggies, many of us assembled here today, answered their nation’s call to arms, even during an unpopular war.
 - They went willingly.
 - They served – in the words found on the confederate memorial in Arlington National Cemetery – “...not for fame or reward, not for place or rank, but in simple obedience to duty, as they understood it.”
 - Having served with honor, most of those of went to Vietnam came home to get on with their lives.
 - However, eleven of our classmates did not return.
- These eleven men from the class of ‘69 – they were among the best of us:
 - They were sons, brothers, and, in several cases, also husbands and fathers.
 - They went when the nation called, several even before the rest of us graduated.
 - They served honorably.
 - They were the epitome of the selfless service that is the hallmark of being an Aggie.
 - In the end -- they laid down their lives for their buddies and their country.
 - In doing so, they left scars on their families, friends, and classmates – scars that will never heal.
- The nation can never adequately repay these men and their families for their sacrifices.

- We can, however, rededicate this ground today – honoring our brothers for their service to the nation.
 - We can hold them in our hearts forever.
 - We can honor their sacrifice.
 - We do so today, paraphrasing the words inscribed on this monument -- “all gave some, these 11 gave all.”
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- So today, let us again honor our fallen comrades and say to them – “You are not forgotten!”
 - We will close by asking you to join me in a moment of silence for our fallen classmates and also for all of our classmates who are no longer with us.
 - After that moment of silence, I would like to ask Mike Curd to lead us in the benediction.

Thank you all for coming.