

50TH INFANTRY REGIMENT MEMORIAL DEDICATION

Fort Benning, Georgia

25 February 2004



There is an inscription on a tombstone, somewhere in the Pacific, of an American soldier who gave his last full measure of devotion fighting for his country. It reads, "Tell them I gave up all my tomorrows, so they could have today." On this particular "today", we honor the members of the 1st Battalion, 50th United States Infantry who gave up all their tomorrows in a distant time and in a distant land called Vietnam.

The first soldier the battalion lost in Vietnam, Tom Pipkin, fathered a child he never saw... and more tragically, a child who never knew him. Going off to war has never been easy, but Tom didn't complain nor did he use his young wife's pregnancy as a means of not going. He died at the age of 20 in a rice paddy, on a dark night; fighting in a country he knew little of in a war he probably didn't understand.

More than 200 additional soldiers fighting under the proud colors of this battalion and Regiment were to meet similar fates before those colors were returned to the United States.

We have gathered today to pay tribute to the memories of those soldiers... men who sacrificed their all so this nation can be free.

Freedom, however, isn't free. A dear price has been paid and a lot of pain endured for that freedom. And it is important for us to understand that those freedoms are more endangered today than at any other time in our nation's history.

Dedicating the memorial at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln said of America, "*We are now engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure*". The nation endured and went on to become even stronger. We are dedicating a similar memorial today... dedicated to fewer numbers, to be sure, but these are not just numbers. These are men we knew... men who were someone's son, brother, husband, uncle and men who were our friends. These were men who had unrealized dreams... men who had a first haircut, a first hit on a baseball diamond, a first kiss from a sweetheart...and men who did not return with us to a nation that was largely ungrateful for their sacrifice.

For us to turn a blind eye to the sacrifices that were made by these young men would be to betray the trust they placed in their country... and in us. Trust that their deaths were for a just and noble cause. Trust that the freedoms for which they died would long endure. Trust that their families would continue to have the benefit of those freedoms. Trust that their deaths will not have been for naught. And that is why this memorial is both fitting and proper. It is overdue, perhaps... but perhaps not.

It has taken some mellowing on my part to be where I am today with respect to that war and to the way I felt about the losses that seemed disproportionate to the cause for which we were fighting... and the frustration I felt for losing our friends... frustrated by a war that was unpopular in a nation that seemed not to care that our friends were dead... and frustrated by fellow veterans of that war who were protesting its continuance, thereby giving our hated enemy new hope and extending the time we were to be there and further causing the political leaders of this nation to make foolish decisions that were without honor...and in doing so, causing more of our friends to die. But we cared and perhaps the time then was not right for a memorial to their sacrifice. The time is now right, however, and we are dedicating a memorial to ensure they are never forgotten.

Lincoln went on to say at the dedication at Gettysburg, *"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us--that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth."*

It is for us the living to go on defending what they died for. It is for us the living survivors of that war to expect to get a bit uncomfortable as we continue to tell the truth even as the vocal minorities try to silence us. It is for us the living to continue the proud traditions that have been set for us as a nation. It is for us the living to continue the standards set for us by this country's founding fathers that wrote our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution. It is for



us, the remaining members of that fateful war to keep alive the memory of those who died. For us to do less would be to dishonor the memory of those who have gone before. For us to do less would be to have wasted all those tomorrows.