

My Holiday

By [Steve Uchniat](#) 11/09/2011 2:02 pm



Steve Uchniat, after a ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at Penn's Landing.

“Today, nearly 40 years after the last of our troops came home, I feel the country has come to respect and appreciate the Vietnam veteran.” — Steve Uchniat

My name is Steve Uchniat, and I am the president of Liberty Bell Chapter 266 of the Vietnam Veterans of America. I was asked by the Northeast Times to offer some reflections about Veterans Day, and being a veteran, let me first say what I feel about Veterans Day. It's what I call my holiday.

I enlisted in the Army and served in Vietnam. I am proud to say I am a veteran. Veterans Day is a holiday for all the men and women who put on that uniform to protect and serve our country, so that we can enjoy the freedoms that we have today.

A little about myself. I enlisted in the Army after I graduated from Mastbaum High, Class of 1967. I went to Fort Bragg, N.C., for boot camp and then on to the Aberdeen Proving Ground, an Army facility near Aberdeen, Md. My tour in Vietnam lasted from February 1968 to '69. I was with the 526th CC&S Co., 5th Maintenance Battalion, outside of Qui Nhon, a coastal city in central Vietnam. After my service in Nam, I was off to Germany for 15 months with the 1st Support Brigade in Mannheim. I was discharged in June 1970.

During the mid-1960s and early '70s, our country was going through some tough times. There was the civil rights movement, sex, drugs, and rock and roll — and at the forefront was the war in Vietnam.

When you turned on the TV in those days, you saw fighting in the streets of American cities. There was unrest on college campuses, with students involved in sit-ins to protest our military's involvement in Vietnam. There were hippies and draft-dodgers burning the American flag.

That really killed me. Kids their age were getting killed in Vietnam for that flag . . . and they were home, burning it. The fighting in Vietnam was the first time a war was seen on TV every night. When I came home, nobody called me a “baby killer” or a drug addict . . . thankfully, no one spit at me in my

uniform . . . but I did hear the stories about that treatment of other soldiers coming home from Vietnam.

I had great support from my family and friends. When you enter the service you take an oath to protect our country. They send you to places all over the world, and you don't ask questions. You just go.

We lost over 58,000 lives in Vietnam, and how many more were wounded? Most estimates put it at 200,000. Some are still living the war today; others have died years after its end, the causes linked to their fighting in Vietnam.

Don't ever tell a Vietnam veteran that we lost the war. We were out of there by 1973. The South Vietnamese lost it in 1975, when Saigon fell.

I lost my friend Marlio in Vietnam in May 1969. He was with the 101st Airborne. For me, the one night I will never forget — and the date — was April 9, 1968. A sniper attack on my company killed seven men and wounded 56 others. Out of respect for them, and for their families, I will never question the war, right or wrong.

Today, nearly 40 years after the last of our troops came home, I feel the country has come to respect and appreciate the Vietnam veteran. The people who protested the war now are the ones who have to answer the questions for what they did. Yet they were allowed to do those things, because veterans fought for their freedom and their right to do them. I guess time does heal all wounds.

Now we have the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they are sending home our next generation of veterans. Whatever your view of these wars, separate the war from the warriors. My son-in-law Joe will be coming home from Afghanistan this month. He also has done two tours in Iraq. I am so proud of what he has done for our country. I hope they all come home soon, safe and sound.

I am a member of the American Legion Post 738, VFW Post 2819, and a life member of the Catholic War Veterans of America and the Vietnam Veterans of America. All of these organizations help veterans who are looking for help in many ways. I think the motto of the Vietnam Veterans of America is so meaningful: Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.

On this Veterans Day, fly your flag, go to a ceremony. If you see someone in uniform, thank them for their service. If you have a veteran in your family, or have a friend who is one, please thank them and tell them to enjoy their day.

God bless America. ••