

**11<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL VIETNAM VETERANS RECOGNITION DAY**  
**Iowa State Capitol – Des Moines, Iowa**  
**May 7, 2019**

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***Keynote Speaker***

**Ambassador Kenneth Quinn**

President, World Food Prize Foundation

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Dan mentioned that the restrooms are over behind the bushes, and I said, “Oh, just like in Vietnam!” What a nice touch to make us all feel good about it.

So, Jackie Schmillen, that was so stirring as you sang the National Anthem, the moment you feel patriotism there—so stirring. You deserve another round of applause.

So it was a day like this, overcast and gray, in March of 1977 when I stood on the tarmac of the airport in Hanoi, and I had similar feelings—just like the ones I got listening to you. Because I was there as part of the first post-war mission to return the remains of Americans, military personnel who had died but whose bodies had not been recovered.

And so we're there. We have a C-130 aircraft, and there's a big metal table set up in front of us. And a truck drives up, kind of a little flatbed. The Vietnamese, North Vietnamese officials get out, and they take ten metal boxes off the back of the truck, bring them out, and lay them on the table in front of us. And then in a dignified way they left us all alone.

And the minute they were gone, from inside the plane came the U.S. military combined services Honor Guard who carried out ten American flags and placed one on top of each metal box. And there, 12,000 miles from home, I felt that same sense of being an American, the pride of being an American, that wells up inside you at moments. And I also felt this sense of fulfilled obligation, because we were being true to these ten men who none of us had ever met. We didn't know their backgrounds. All we knew was they were fellow Americans, and we were bringing them home. We were fulfilling the bond that everyone who's here who was in Vietnam knows, that held us together in combat.

It took me back to my time in the Delta. So you heard about — here I was a State Department civilian from Dubuque. So I went to the State Department, Governor. I thought I was going to be going to fancy parties in Paris or London, you know, sipping wine and chatting and holding teacups. And I got sent to Vietnam—and not to the embassy. I was deployed with MACV. I replaced an Army major. I led a team that had a hundred percent casualties, and I did all of the things my military predecessor did.

I did over a hundred hours in the back of Huey helicopters. They sent me to the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav and always with a Vietnamese officer at my side as we ran operations helping the Viet Cong protect the Vinh Long Army Airfield. I went on night ambushes, just two of us—one Army sergeant and me—with Vietnamese troops, walking through those rice patties during the day. Those of you who did that know how draining that could be. Yeah, right. And I rode on Navy craft assaulting islands with shots coming at you. And when tracers are coming at you, every one looks like it's going to go right between your eyes.

But in all of those experiences, if at anytime you heard on the radio that a uniformed Sierra, an American, was in danger, at risk, hurt, under fire, you went. You didn't ever ask—“Who is it?” “What unit are they from?” All you needed to know was they were Americans—and you went.

The Vietnam War was this incredible, unpopular war in America, such turmoil and during a time of very, very difficult race relations. And yet, it was in that war, in those jungles that I saw—I

don't know if you saw, but I saw—when race, ethnicity, your background, the color of your skin, your political persuasion all disappeared. People put their lives at risk for fellow Americans and never asked where they were from, what was the color of their skin.

That was the bond that I felt there in Hanoi. We were never leaving anyone behind on the battlefield. And that carried through my work with Governor Ray on refugees, the evacuation of Saigon, trying to save as many endangered Vietnamese as we could at the last minute, my work on POW/MIA. Jim Schimberg's name is on that wall. He was my classmate at Loras College, one of the 2500 that were fully accounted for.

And I saw the suffering of those who came home—but with medical problems. For years I suffered from lung issues from Agent Orange. I loved Agent Orange when I was in Vietnam—it cleared all the weeds out so nobody could sneak up on you. But who knew it was devastating us afterwards?

And I saw the pain and suffering of families, especially the families of POW/MIAs. There I was in 1991 in the National League of Families Convention. A young woman in her twenties comes up to me, shows me a picture. She says, "That's my father." And her mother is there, "That's my husband." Said they're alive in Vietnam. You have to go and get them."

So I went, and I was trained in Vietnamese. I was interpreter for the President in the White House, Vietnamese. I went. I negotiated in Vietnamese and for the first time ever, the Vietnamese said to us, "You can go to any prison you want. You pick the prison." And we went. And I went and got us access to Cambodia where we had never had it. \_\_\_\_\_ happens today. And I'm so proud to say that I served with the U.S. military personnel in Vietnam in combat.

God bless you all. Thanks for having me here.