

Address at 55th Reunion Commemoration

Good morning classmates and families. I think most of you know me, I am Mike Cronin.

We meet here on this beautiful day to remember our departed classmates. It has been more than 55 years since graduation and nearly 60 years since we were sworn in on July 7th, 1959. Memories are still strong about life as a midshipman and our life in the service.

Perhaps it would be worthwhile to pause for a moment to ask ourselves: What is the real nature of our and their loss?

Certainly it is not merely the physical fact of death of our classmates in Vietnam, or while in active service or by illness, for death is faced by all.

For those who died in combat or while in active service I suspect that their suffering was not great, for these were brave men. The brave suffer the least because they do not live in fear even though they have fears. The real tragedy of death is the loss of life; especially the loss of promising young lives.

Now after all these years it may be easier to understand what they lost. Look around you. They lost the chance to have families, careers, dreams, hopes, victories, failures, disappointments, lost loves. Yes, even the chance to suffer, for this too is a part of life.

We, the lucky ones, and yes all of us here today are among the lucky. Each of you have most likely faced danger and life threatening events, but here we are. Yet each of us has also suffered a loss as well, the families of those men especially, but all of us. We lost the chance to know these men fully. They are frozen in time as young men with great expectations. We as well as they have been denied their life. These losses are final, irrevocable, and uncompensable.

The simple and compelling aspect of all this is that we had life all these years, and yet have hopes and dreams for the future, even as we age. They have had none of this; they can't even share our sadness that they are lost.

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Our classmates who were lost in Vietnam were part of a sad chapter in American history. As we suspected then and now know there was no plan for victory, merely a policy unsupported by determined action of the right kind at the right time and place.

What does that mean now? We must not let confusion and debate about the failed policies in Vietnam besmirch our memories of these fine men. They and all those lost in operations outside of Vietnam were brave, loyal, and prepared to serve, even if the ultimate price was to be paid. We must not let them be distant plastic heroes, for they were real human beings. Those I knew best, J.B. Worcester, Dan Moran, and Carl Doughtie- were all very fine humans, but human nonetheless.

I said a moment ago that we are all among the lucky. If you can excuse a personal recollection, I will tell you how I learned a lesson about luck. I bet many of you have stories about your good luck- here's mine. I was shot down just south of Than Hoa on Friday January 13th 1967. I had only two weeks remaining to complete my second and final Vietnam deployment. My A4 was on fire and broke up. For a while I was trapped in the cockpit and thought that was the end, but I did get out and descended through a hail of gunfire that missed me to be quickly captured. There followed 16 days travel and torture and interrogation and attacks by our own forces while traveling up route 1 to the Hanoi Hilton. Once there there were two months of torture and interrogation all the while in solitary confinement with no way to communicate with others.

Eventually I was moved into the main compound and was able to communicate with other POWs.

The only source of real news we ever had was info brought in by newer POWs. I soon learned that my friend, squadron mate and classmate Dan Moran had been shot down two days after me. He was injured in the cockpit, made it out over the water and ejected. The rescue destroyer got to him and picked him up- dead from loss of blood. Dan had joined the squadron around the same time as me and was due to return home to his wife in two weeks. That was a wake up call. In spite of all the misery and the grim outlook for an uncertain future- I was alive and lucky to be so in spite of everything. My luck held and here I am more than 50 years later.

None of these men planned to die as selfless plastic heroes might do. Rather they did what they saw as their duty with full knowledge of the risks and in spite of their love of life and their personal hopes and dreams of the future.

They were afflicted with the same human fears and apprehensions as all of us are. And yet they repeatedly exposed themselves to great danger as they saw this as their duty in service to their country. It is this willingness to do their duty in spite of their human frailties that makes them heroes.

We remember these men mostly in a human context as our friends and classmates rather than as officers. This is so even though they did their duty as naval officers as well

as any have done before or since in the history of our republic.

They and the battles they fought will not be memorialized in Victory at Sea and have largely been forgotten but, you and I, we know the truth. None have fought more bravely than they did for the Republic.

We are here to memorialize tragic events, but we are not here to wallow in sadness. If I may presume to speak for our departed classmates, I think they would not like that.

They were good open hearted men who would wish us to live well. They would want to be remembered with a smile and a toast rather than a tear.

We are all among the lucky. Many of you had many of the same experiences as also had the departed. You have experienced hard times and danger and stress and carried out the finest traditions of the service and been a strong link in the chain. Wives also had hard times. It has been said that: "They also serve who only sit and wait." All of you know well that there much more to it than that.

But luck does not give, it only lends.

I believe our departed classmates would counsel us to live every day to the fullest, to drink deeply of the great and small pleasures of life. And to face life's struggles with joy founded on the knowledge that we are fortunate to have the opportunity to engage in the struggles of life.

Tonight most of us will be at company events. May I suggest to you that we should remember our departed classmates with a toast and a smile and warm memories of the fine men and dear friends that they were. These men were links in the chain of service as are we all as well.