

Fresno Memorial Day service reminds veterans, families that 'freedom isn't free'

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The day Gilbert Ortiz got to Vietnam in 1968, he set out on a search for his best friend from high school, a fellow company mate under the Army 1st Infantry Division.

"I was looking for him," Ortiz said, "only to find out he had been shot that day and killed."

1,400 The number of American flags that covered Fresno Memorial Gardens on Memorial Day

The death was hard for the 18-year-old to handle. Now at age 68, Ortiz considers himself lucky to have survived the war. He served for two years and was wounded with steel shrapnel in his legs and back, which has made it difficult for him to walk.

On Memorial Day, he took three grandchildren to [Fresno Memorial Gardens](#) to watch the 52nd annual service. Ortiz reflected on his many friends who were killed in action, as well as his two brothers who are buried in the cemetery, both Vietnam veterans who lived through the war and died years later.

"I'm very grateful that I made it and I'm alive," he said. "I don't take it for granted."

More than 1,400 American flags covered the manicured gardens in southwest Fresno. The flags were on loan or donations by families of the 2,500 veterans interred at the cemetery. The custom started in 1963 with just 35 flags.

Around 1,000 people attended the ceremony, evading the hot midday sun by gathering in clusters under shady maple and oak trees. Hundreds stood for the Pledge of Allegiance and "Star Spangled Banner." Some raised their right hands to their temples in a salute.

Modesta Vasquez, 62, of Fresno, wiped away tears as Jeff Hall sang "God Bless the USA" — a song that she said always makes her cry. Her brother fought in Vietnam and two brothers-in-law served in the Korean War. Her brother was missing in action for six months, but was later found alive.

Vasquez said Memorial Day "means everything" because it recognizes those who ensure the freedom of their fellow citizens.

"We don't realize how much they give up," she said. "I saw my mom pray every night until my brother came home. She never lost faith."

Lynda Gray, 68, of Fresno watched the service from behind the crowd on her way to leave flowers for her late father, World War II veteran Ted Scheidt, who died 15 years ago.

"As you get older, it gets worse," she said. "It makes you think of your own mortality. I can't imagine what it's like for others who lost people in the war."

Sarah Von Dolteren posed for photos with her 2-year-old son in front of her late grandfather's flag. Manuel Staffero, a U.S. Navy and Army veteran who served in WWII and Korea, died in August. Van Dolteren said the tribute looked beautiful.

"I didn't think it would affect me as much, but I'm tearing up," she said, looking around at the flags in every direction. "You forget how many people are here that have served our country and lost their lives. I wish we had more days to

think about things like this.”

Gilbert Ortiz’s son joined the Army and served in Iraq, despite his father’s reluctance. Ortiz’s grandchildren, who are growing up around their father’s and grandfather’s uniforms and equipment, are fascinated by the military. On Monday, they wore camouflage outfits.

“I want them to be aware of it, but I wouldn’t want them to experience war,” Ortiz said.

But the children are curious, every year asking more serious questions during Memorial Day celebrations.

“They ask me, ‘They died in the war? How did they die?’ I explain this is the price we pay for our freedom,” he said.

Ortiz said the goal is for his grandchildren to be grateful for those who died in war, because, as he learned that first day in Vietnam, “freedom isn’t free.”

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