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Vietnam vets return to South Boston for 30-year tribute

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 19, 2011

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PAT GREENHOUSE / GLOBE STAFF

A single rose was placed at the foot of the South Boston Vietnam Memorial at the annual rededication ceremony yesterday.

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Donald Turner Jr. was a month old when his father, 21, a Marine, died while serving in Vietnam. Turner, now 42, knows his dad only through stories from his mother and others.

For the past three decades, on one day each year, Turner hears those stories from a crew of Vietnam veterans who grew up with his father in South Boston.

“All these people have been so good to me,” Turner said yesterday at Medal of Honor Park in South Boston. “They come up to me all the time. They say he was a brave guy.”

He was standing a short distance from where some 50 Vietnam veterans were dressed in their Sunday finest, each with a red carnation pinned to his suit jacket lapel.

They surrounded a black stone memorial enclosed within a fenced-off circular site in the park, where the names of

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25 fallen soldiers from the neighborhood, including Turner's father, Donald, are engraved in white lettering.

On Sept. 13, 1981, the monument became the first in the country dedicated to the memory of Americans who served and died in Vietnam with official recognition from the president and all five military branches.

The back of the stone bears the words "Welcome Home."

Families of fallen soldiers, veterans, active service members, residents, and elected officials returned to the site yesterday for the memorial's 30th annual rededication.

"They're very tight knit, these guys," Turner said of the veterans. "To be part of that, it makes me proud."

His mother, Donna Cashins, stood alongside him. After the ceremony concluded, she was greeted by a familiar face.

Ed Fitzgerald was the Marine who, on Jan. 21, 1969, traveled to South Boston to deliver the news to the then 20-year-old Mrs. Turner, she was a widow.

"He was so good to me," Cashins said after they hugged.

Echoing a theme expressed by nearly all of the day's speakers, Turner said the South Boston community's loyalty and familial feel among neighbors played a large role in getting the memorial built and continuing to honor it each year.

"I think it's pretty impressive," he said of the dedication's turnout the years. "You see people in shorts and T-shirts walking by, and they stop and stay for the whole time. Some may not have any connection to it at all."



**Vietnam War memorial
rededicated in South Boston**

Captain Richard Stratton, a Vietnam Navy veteran and South Boston native who was a prisoner of war for six years, flew up Saturday from his home in Jacksonville, Fla., to attend the ceremonies.

“South Boston is family,” he said, still calling it home. “I’ve never seen anything like this community. If you come back here 60 years later, you’ll see the same turnout.”

Jerry Turner, a cousin of Donald Turner, served in the Army during Vietnam.

He is a founding member of the South Boston committee that had the memorial built and has maintained it since.

While overseas, he said he received letters from South Boston friends who wrote about fistfights with neighbors who opposed to the war.

But the neighborhood had an overwhelmingly positive reaction toward returning troops, Jerry Turner said.

“The community was pretty good here,” he said.

When he and four fellow South Boston veterans reached out to neighbors for their help to build the memorial, the community just stood right up. They just started throwing money at us,” he said.


For active Marine Sergeant Eric Massie, attending yesterday’s dedication was “a humbling experience.”

Born more than a decade after the Vietnam War ended, Massie has heard the stories of how many American soldiers were not welcomed upon their return home - a stark contrast with the reception that returning troops receive today.

“When we come home now, the gratitude from the civilian side, the outpouring, is amazing,” said Massie, who has been warmly welcomed back from a tour in Iraq and another in Afghanistan during his 5 1/2-year military career. “It’s a different time.”

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