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22nd Infantry's Vietnam dead honored

New monument dedicated at Benning

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Another war, another time, another monument.

Army Lt. Bob Babcock was leading his soldiers through Vietnam's central highlands near the Cambodian border when the mortars came.

Amid the explosions, Babcock, then 23, heard someone call for a medic, and then a "dust off," which meant immediate helicopter evacuation was needed. Babcock rushed to the scene, expecting 19-year-old Pfc. David Mendez to be on the radio, making the call.

But shrapnel had ripped a hole through his radioman's heart.

"He never knew what hit him," Babcock said.

The death of the young radioman shook Babcock as he had come to like Mendez.

"He was a sharp young man, very soft-spoken, without much to say," Babcock said.

His anguish worsened when he discovered Mendez had been killed by friendly fire. Ten other soldiers from the 22nd Infantry Regiment had been wounded in the incident.

Soldiers wrapped Mendez's body in a poncho and placed him atop Babcock's bunker, away from the dead soldier's platoon. Babcock knew it would have spent his platoon's morale to hold vigil over Mendez's body through the night.

So Babcock sat near the body. He doesn't like to talk much about that night, or what he was thinking about.

"I wasn't thinking I'd be standing here now, paying honors to him," Babcock, now 60, said Wednesday at Fort Benning during a monument dedication ceremony for the Vietnam War dead of the 22nd Infantry Regiment.

Behind him, the monument was draped with a parachute. Three American flags, which had been used to cover the caskets of three of the regiment's soldiers killed in Vietnam, hung as a backdrop.

Herbert C. Chancey Jr.'s voice quivered a little when he looked in that direction. He recalled a young sergeant named Franco.

They had been near a river when the Viet Cong opened fire in ambush. Franco was wounded. Chancey, then a 30-year-old captain, grabbed the sergeant by the arm and put him on an Army riverboat.

In the ensuing chaos, the riverboat driver panicked. He flipped the boat and three soldiers drowned, including Franco.

"In less than 30 days he would have been home," said Chancey, 65, of Daytona Beach, Fla. "We lost three kids that day for nothing. What do you say?"

Retired soldiers from the 22nd took turns at the lectern during the ceremony. They talked about sacrifice, regiment history and the more than 825 of the regiment's soldiers killed in Vietnam.

"They were our nation's treasure," said Bill Allison, during the "Fallen Comrades" section of the ceremony, reminding a crowd of about 50 that more than 1 million American soldiers have died in war since the nation was founded.

Monuments, Allison and other speakers said, are important because they are eternal. They are like tombstones for the fallen masses. The 22nd's is only one of many outside Fort Benning's National Infantry Museum. It's not likely to be the last.

The survivors talked about how their beloved 22nd Infantry Regiment is now in Afghanistan and Iraq, without drawing any parallels to their situation in Vietnam.

Asked about comparisons between Vietnam and Iraq, Babcock bristled. "That's a bunch of bull crap," he said. "I don't buy that at all. We've only been there five months."

But James T. Sills said a comparison can be made, and it bothers him. He fought in Korea and Vietnam, the most politically unpopular wars America has fought. Soldiers, he said, are warriors. But -- like in Vietnam -- soldiers are subjected to existing political ambiguities associated with police-type work in a hostile and unfamiliar culture.

"What agitates me about Vietnam as well as Iraq, is the military's hands are tied," said Sills, of Albany, Ga., a retired first sergeant. "They cannot do their mission because of politics."

But politics were not at issue Wednesday. The day was for remembering the dead.

Babcock said every surviving soldier recalls a certain soldier who never made it home. His was Mendez.

Sills, however, said he made it a point to forget the names of the fallen.

"I saw too many of them dead," said Sills, 71. "I hardened my heart long ago to not remember names. I find it a lot easier."