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East Valley parade honors Vietnam War veterans

TRIBUNE NEWS STAFF

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People of all ages from throughout the region turn out annually to cheer veterans marching in the East Valley Veterans Day Parade. (File photo)

The East Valley Veterans Day Parade will step off at 11 a.m. Saturday in downtown Mesa with a special theme honoring Vietnam War veterans.

Marking the 50th anniversary of America's withdrawal of combat troops from Vietnam, the parade, with a theme titled "Vietnam Valor," will be led by retired Navy Cross Recipient USMC 1st Sgt. John J. Lord, serving as grand marshal, and six parade marshals from different branches of the Armed Forces who also served in Vietnam.

"While any conflict, including the Vietnam War, is never cause for celebration, it is essential that we recognize and celebrate the valor of the service and sacrifices made by our brave veterans," said Lisa Sandoval, a veteran and president/parade director of the East Valley Veterans Parade Association.

According to the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, over 500,000 military veterans live in the state of Arizona – with nearly 180,000 of them having served during the Vietnam Era.

According to the U.S. Defense Department, 40,934 American military personnel were killed in action during the Vietnam War and another 5,299 died of wounds. The vast majority of the casualties were Army personnel, though Marines accounted for over quarter of total deaths.

Of the estimated 2.6 million Vietnam veterans, between 1 million and 1.6 million "either fought in combat, provided close combat support or were at least fairly regularly exposed to enemy attack," according to the New York City Vietnam Veterans Memorial Plaza. It also says 7,484 women served in Vietnam, of whom 6,250 or 83.5% were nurses.

Lord joined the Marines in 1965 after watching a TV report on the grueling conditions soldiers faced in Vietnam.

After seeing the report, he turned to his mother and said "Mom, those guys need my help and I gotta go!"

A year after he enlisted, he was deployed to Vietnam for the first of tours.

It was on his second tour as a platoon sergeant assigned to Kilo Company that he and his men inadvertently walked into an ambush.

Under heavy enemy fire, Kilo Company received orders to fall back – which it was doing when Lord saw two of his men were hit.

He not only carried them to safety but filled in for a wounded radio to direct air support for their rescue.

The East Valley Veterans Parade Association is an all-volunteer community event organization that relies on the generosity of local businesses, organizations, and individuals to accomplish this collective patriotic tribute.

The East Valley Veterans Parade has a storied past.

When the annual Mesa Veterans Parade fell victim to necessary budget cuts in 2006, local residents Gerry Walker and Frank “Gunny” Alger spoke out on behalf of the 40-year-old Mesa tradition.

“There will be a Veterans Day parade if it is only me marching down the street with Frank watching,” Walker declared.

The Marine Corps League Saguaro Chapter in Mesa took the lead and the Mesa Veterans Parade Association was formed.

In 2013, the all-volunteer organization changed its name to the East Valley Veterans Parade Association to reflect the participation of parade entrants and sponsors from most East Valley communities, including Queen Creek.

The parade begins at 11 a.m. at the intersection of Center Street and University Drive in Mesa.

The East Valley Veterans Day Parade is an opportunity for people in the region to come together and express appreciation for all of the region’s veterans, active military members and their families.

“And, especially for our Vietnam Veterans, it is a chance to let them know that their sacrifices are valued and that their service is not forgotten,” said Sandoval.

“Come join us in giving them a heartfelt welcome that they may not have previously experienced.”

That referenced the fact that many Vietnam veterans returned to see their service scorned at the time as protests against the war scorned the thousands who had been drafted to fight it.

The parade features over 100 parade entries – from active and retired members of the armed services and their families to high school marching bands and local patriotic businesses and civic organizations.

People are encouraged to “celebrate all of our veterans – and especially Vietnam Veterans – and ensure that their contributions are recognized and celebrated for generations to come.” Sandoval said.

Information: evvp.org.

The East Valley Veterans Parade is supported by a variety of organizations and companies.

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