



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrew J. Lanza

14th annual Vietnam Veteran's Day honors veterans, S.I. vet inducted into Hall of Fame

ANDREW J. LANZA March 22, 2022

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Kayla Simas - SILive-

The 14th annual Vietnam Veteran's Day celebration honored Vietnam veterans Saturday afternoon at Tottenville High School in Huguenot.

The celebration also included an inductee to the New York State Senate Veterans' Hall of Fame, Staten Islander Gene DiGiacomo. The New York State Senate Veterans' Hall of Fame was created to honor and recognize the outstanding veterans throughout New York state, who have gone above and beyond in both military and civilian life.

In addition to the veterans and their families, Sen. Andrew Lanza (R-South Shore), District Attorney Michael McMahon, Congresswoman Nicole Malliotakis (R-Staten Island/South Brooklyn), Councilman David Carr (R-Mid-Island), and Tottenville's ROTC were at Saturday's celebration.

The ROTC from Tottenville performed taps, handled the flag folding ceremony, and presented the color guard.

Gene DiGiacomo, president of the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 421, was honored by Lanza for his service and bravery in both military and civilian life.

DiGiacomo expressed his surprise when Lanza announced his induction.

"I was told a couple of years ago, before COVID that I would be put up for this, but then COVID happened and then it went away," said DiGiacomo. "Nothing was ever said, and I never thought about it. Today at the service that Lanza does for us graciously, it was really an honor in a half and surprise. This day [for Vietnam Veterans] is a 'thank you' and a 'welcome home' and fit the celebration," he said.

DiGiacomo served in the United States Navy Seabees as a Second Class Petty Officer from 1969 to 1970.

He served nearby Quang Tri and Qua Viet, where he was involved in the process of purifying the water for the camps. It was there he witnessed sacrifices made by all those who served

during the conflict.

The Veterans' Hall of Fame honored DiGiacomo for being an active participant in helping to curate and preserve the memory of those who fell during the Vietnam War by sharing their stories, and ensuring that school-aged children on Staten Island understand the sacrifices and hardships endured throughout their time at war.

DiGiacomo said he is looking to continue his service and extend it to his "brothers and sisters" of the Vietnam Conflict -- and those that are not part of his chapter -- for anyone who may need help.

"[Vietnam Veterans] need to come and be part of the chapter so that we can work with them and their problems," said DiGiacomo. "Right now, our battle is the problems with the VA hospitals closing. But this could mean anything that they may need help with."

DiGiacomo expressed that when many Vietnam Veterans became "closet veterans because if you were recognized as a veteran, you were shunned on."

"A lot of us just chose to forget and that didn't help during the healing process," said DiGiacomo. "It's terrible to go through a war, and then come home and have people spit on or rocks at you. I was, unfortunately, part of that when I came home."

Lanza stated that it was "with great honor that I induct Gene DiGiacomo into the New York State Senate Veteran's Hall of Fame. Under his leadership, Staten Island became the birthplace of Vietnam Veterans Day in New York State. Gene served as a hero in Vietnam and he serves as a leader and patriot to this day."

DiGiacomo advocated nearly 15 years ago for a day to honor Vietnam Veterans. His advocacy caught the attention of Lanza.

Lanza introduced the bill in 2008 and then-assemblyman Matthew Titone sponsored the bill in the Assembly. The New York State governor at the time, David Paterson, signed the bill into law which declared March 29 as a day to honor Vietnam Veterans.

The date carries historical significance: On March 29, 1973, the last 2,500 U.S. troops were withdrawn from South Vietnam, ending the nation's longest war. Those troops returned home to an America divided, an America that often shunned its veterans.

Lanza explained while the celebration is to honor the bravery and sacrifice of our beloved Vietnam veterans, the celebration was also to show a "united voice to declare Never Again. Never again will any future generation of veterans be abandoned, looked down upon, or forgotten. These men and women ensure that the beacon of American freedom continues to shine."

"Thanks to people like John Kerry, Jane Fonda, and too many others, the mistreatment of returning Vietnam vets is a shameful chapter in American history. The meaning and importance of Vietnam Veterans Day is that we have an opportunity to express contrition and penitence and above all say to our vets: welcome home, welcome home, welcome home!"

During the celebration, Lanza did a presentation with pictures and names of the 85 men from Staten Island who were killed in action.

"It's a very touching experience," said DiGiacomo. "The one thing that is so great to me about this day is the politicians who show up, whether they are republican or democrat, politics are not involved. Instead, they are there for us -- the Veterans -- and they are working together. To see that and say thank you, it's a big part of our healing process."

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