Telling the stories of a narrow escape from Vietnam and an immigrant’s struggle in America, Brig. Gen. Viet Luong captured hearts and minds at an event that brought the Trojan and military families together Wednesday evening.

Luong gave the keynote address at the seventh annual gala for USC veterans and ROTC students at The Westin Bonaventure Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

“This fabled story only happens here,” said Luong, who in 2014 became the first U.S. military general born in Vietnam. “I am an American by choice, not by birth.”

More than pride

Welcoming 800 guests, many in full dress uniform, USC President C. L. Max Nikias noted the university’s unwavering commitment to the U.S. armed forces.

“It is more than pride we feel, it is love of country,” Nikias said. “This banquet is a powerful reminder that we live in a country borne on a mighty dream of freedom. Our veterans are part of a long line of noble warriors who answer that call, and they will always have our deepest gratitude.”

Introducing the guest of honor, Nikias said, “There is no one who epitomizes more what it takes to be a soldier than Viet Luong.”

Passionate about freedom

Luong was just nine years old when he and his family fled Vietnam in 1975, one day before Saigon fell. A U.S. Marine helicopter flew Luong and his family to safety aboard the USS Hancock, a U.S. aircraft carrier. Standing on the deck, the young refugee decided to one day serve the United States.

“We didn’t come here to fight and we certainly didn’t come here to die,” Luong said, “but we are passionate about freedom and we are willing to put our lives on the line.”

The general spoke of life in Los Angeles as a teen, when family members pooled money from low-wage jobs at gas stations and garment factories.

“We had liberty and the right to choose how we lived our lives,” Luong said. “We were afforded the opportunities given to us by the Constitution.”

Luong, who now serves as chief of staff of U.S. Army Central, attended USC on a full ROTC scholarship. Addressing cadets, he emphasized the responsibility that accompanies command.

“You are about to embark on an incredible journey,” Luong said. “The world you enter is tumultuous at best, so you must have the courage to face it head on.”
USC’s ROTC program celebrates centennial anniversary

The seventh annual USC Veterans Appreciation Dinner honored more than 800 military service members and their families

1. President Nikias (standing) with World War II veterans (from left to right) Richard Vivian, Peter Caggiano, and Bruce Kaji
2. The annual dinner is held in honor of USC’s veterans and current ROTC students.
3. (from left) First Lady Niki C. Nikias, USC President C. L. Max Nikias, Brigadier General Viet Luong, and his wife Kim. Brigadier General Luong, a USC alumnus who provided this year’s keynote address, currently serves as chief of staff of U.S. Army Central Command.
4. (from left) Colonel Christopher Michelsen, Lieutenant Colonel Justin Chezem, President Nikias, Brigadier General Viet Luong, Chairman of the USC Board of Trustees John Mork, and Lieutenant Colonel Olivia Nelson
5. For the “march on the cake” tradition, the highest-ranking officer, Brig. Gen. Luong cut a cake with the youngest, most junior-ranking ROTC member present, 4/C Tristan Martel.
6. President Nikias with USC ROTC students
7. In 1944, a crowd at the Old College sends off USC students as they leave for active duty.
8. At the event, USC Trustee Edward P. Roski Jr. presents medals of honor to USC’s World War II veterans Jeff Arnett, Donald Pinkerton, and Jack Kunitomi.
9. President Nikias with USC alumnus, Charles Repp, a veteran of World War II

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