The American Dream

As the lights disappeared outside of Sergeant Marshal Giese's window on March 22, 1969, the reality set in that his horrors had come to an end. With his loving fiancé patiently waiting for his safe arrival home, he was ready to begin a new life in the small town of Gresham, Wisconsin. This brave hero happens to be my Grandpa. However, his journey is far from over.

His expedition began March 24th, 1968. The muggy air of Vietnam filled his senses as he took his first step off the plane. His new military life was far from the liberty he experienced in the states. Nothing had prepared him for what would happen next.

He slotted into his role of sergeant upon his arrival in Quang Tri. He is prudent, diligent, and full of sagacity—the qualities which make a model leader. These leaders did not receive any special treatment; living conditions were far from habitable. Men were confined to tents and the meals meant to feed the ones defending our country did not serve them justice. The powdered eggs, powdered milk, and spam not only lacked nutrition, but took his appetite away.

Nothing could compare to walking the tightrope at night. Because, during the day a spot was picked, beyond the wire, and when the sun sunk beneath the horizon, they would return. This area was known as a listening post, or L.P. for short. Only four individuals were chosen for this position; it was a position not taken lightly in any way. The details included carefully listening to all action nearby and report it through walkie talkies back to the main base. However, there is one night that stands out above all
else. It was a mundane night beyond the wire, reporting back to base as if it was second nature. Then out of nowhere, his only connection to civilization gave out. He suddenly became more wary of his surroundings, closely observing anything and everything. In fact, it's hard to believe he survived that night. Without a doubt, this was the riskiest job.

As a sergeant, his responsibilities exceed his peers. One of which included guarding the bunker while the sun beat down his back and when the only light was the moon. You could say sergeants were always on watch.

His journey then led him to the next base over, Dong Ha. His new responsibility was fixing broken parts on weapons and changing gun tubes inside of man made buildings. This trade was not new to him as he learned these skills in Germany before he was shipped to Vietnam. Conditions in Dong Ha were an improvement from Quang Tri. The tents were now huts and the powdered meals became c-rations. However, his stomach was not able to recover from the horrid meals he had previously been subsisting on.

Through everything, the letters he received from his fiance, Susan Westphal, motivated him to make it through his military days. He met his wife, my grandma, while on leave in the states from December to March 1968. He savored his days with his loved ones as he knew when March 21 rolled around, he would leave for Vietnam.

My grandpa departed Vietnam on March 22, 1969. Leading up to his freedom, he knew this phase of his life was over—the endless nights, the fights, it was all over. Ten days before departure, he was sent back to Dang Ha to begin processing out of the military. He sat where his journey began, the tarmac where he first stepped foot in
Vietnam is the same tarmac where he will leave Vietnam for the last time. Without hesitation, he boarded his ticket to home.

As I closed my interview with my grandpa, I asked him what his biggest struggle was after his safe return. It took me off guard when he began with, “You may leave Vietnam, but Vietnam never leaves you.” It explained everything: the night terrors and, most importantly, the post traumatic stress disorder which he was recently diagnosed with last May. It meant the world to finally have an explanation for his struggles, and everything suddenly began to fall into place. He joined his local support group that included veterans who shared the same experiences and were motivated to share his truth. Expressing his internal battles has allowed him to accept his past and grow beyond Vietnam.

Now seventy two years young, you wouldn't believe everything that has shaped him into the exemplary individual he is now. Interviewing my Grandpa not only opened my eyes to his personal story but allowed me to broaden my perspective on what it truly means to serve your country. It takes more than mental toughness to succeed in a toxic environment. It all makes sense why I always see him proudly display his “Vietnam Veteran” cap. The ordinary accessory often passed over symbolizes a warrior, a fighter, a survivor. The road to the pursuit of happiness is often achieved after experiencing an event which changed the course in which you decide to live your life. Fulfillment of happiness isn’t achieved through materialistic goods, but remaining true to your morals and values. My grandpa’s experiences guided him along the path of experiencing the true meaning of the American dream.