Heather Greenberg
Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. - Wisconsin State Counsel
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In His Shoes

An article entitled "Characteristics of a Real Soldier," published on The Professional Military Network: Rally Point, discusses what attributes professional military personnel must possess. The author describes many profound responsibilities that are embodied in being a United States Soldier. He specifically mentions soldiers' values of respect, selflessness, integrity and courage. He describes the role of a soldier as and an extreme responsibility with the utmost standards and the most intense exposure to reality. Currently, as a high school senior, I have experienced minimal exposure to "reality." In fact, my reality is much different than a soldier's reality, because the role of a soldier do what no one else is capable of. Due to the characteristics these Americans possess, I have been able to live freely, while voicing my opinions and attending my own church along the way. I am eternally grateful for every individual who has sacrificed their time, energy and life to defend our freedom.

Specifically, I am very grateful for a distinct Vietnam veteran: Jesse C. Greenberg. This veteran has dedicated his life to serving others. He not only sacrificed five years of his life in the Vietnam War, but he has also dedicated over fifty years serving my family. My grandfather, Jesse C. Greenberg, chose to enlist in the Navy forces at a young age of eighteen. Up to this point, the Vietnam War was already approaching five years of conflict; however, the United States was not involved for the entire duration of this war. In fact, according to "Milestones in
the History of U.S. Foreign Relations,” the United States first began their involvement with the Vietnam War on August 7, 1964 when Congress passed “the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing President Johnson to take [action] and to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia.” The crisis, that was considered the Vietnam War, allowed the United States to enact the Selective Service, more commonly known as the draft. My grandfather chose to enlist during this time, because although he witnessed many people receiving deferments, he knew eventually those deferments would no longer be available.

His first step in the military was very similar to the process today’s soldiers participate in: basic training. Although, upon completing basic training, he had more specific training in the area of electronics. As my interview continued I couldn’t help but wonder what type of electronic education my techno-phobic grandpa once had. His remark to my contemplation included: “Let’s just say computers were rustic compared to modern technology.” Nonetheless, he went on to explain how his FTA training taught him about “electronics” such as setting or disabling remote detonators. Shortly after he was deployed to South Vietnam, his knowledge became absolutely essential for him along with his comrades.

During his tour, my grandfather was sent on missions with a “secret clearance” throughout Vietnam, along with his fellow soldiers. Working on his destroyer “DDG-22 U.S.S. Benjamin Stoddert,” he had two main tasks: “search and destroy” and “search and rescue.” As I began to inquire about specifics of each task, he quickly informed me. Search and destroy was the easiest to comprehend: “just blow up everything.” Whether it was “a truck, plane, or barge,” his orders said to “blow it up,” hence the title: “destroy.” Participating and executing this type of assignment obviously has mental and emotional struggles associated with it;
however, the mental struggles attached to his second mission were worse. “Search and rescue” seems simple at first, “see a down pilot” and as quickly as possible “rescue them before any Vietnamese can capture them.” Although this assignment may have been more direct, the emotional and mental scars it left for my grandfather are very intense. He mentioned situations where he quickly “sped over to a floating pilot,” only to find him “already dead.” Whether the soldier was dead or alive, his job was to collect their bodies. I can tell, from the tone in his voice, that he “rescued” many unfortunate soldiers.

Later, he indicated that those soldiers were rescued to be brought home, but if they were dead “the best storage area was the freezer.” I saw a different side of him when he pointed out that the “meat was all stored together.” I realized that it wasn’t because he wanted to seem inhuman or careless, rather it that was the only way to overcome the situation he was living in. According to “Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics,” the Vietnam conflicts seized the lives of nearly sixty-thousand Americans. These statistics not only serve as a reminder that War is unforgiving, but also reminds me that my family was blessed with God’s mercy during this time. My grandfather had experienced the death of many comrades, yet he also found room in his heart for the innocent. At one point he said: “Eventually you almost had to feel sorry for the Vietnamese people because so many shots were fired, they had no idea who was even shooting at them.”

My grandfather did his job and he did his job well. He had always been a respectful, sincere and dedicated person, so his role in the United States Navy was no different. Signed on January 18, 1968 by the secretary of the Navy and his destroyer captain F.B. Taylor Jr. U.S.N., Jesse C. Greenberg and the soldiers aboard DDG-22 U.S.S. Benjamin Stoddert, each received a
Meritorious Unit Commendation for “their outstanding initiative, aggressiveness, and professional skill [...] courage, perseverance, and devotion to duty.” However, even though his career in the United States Navy was done with the highest standards, my grandfather still struggles to admit he was a veteran. He is proud to have served his country, but due to the circumstances in which he returned from Vietnam, he does not feel the need to bring attention to this part of his life. This is a tragedy many Vietnam veterans live with. An article entitled “Coming Home: Vietnam Veterans In American Society,” addresses other stories of Vietnam veterans struggling to open up about their experiences and service. In fact, this article reveals that “many other veterans began to question the war and their own actions in it” when they were rejected by society upon their return home.

As I continued to interview my grandfather about the specifics of his military experience, he opened up to me unlike I had ever witnessed before. It seemed as though he just needed a valuable reason to tell his story. It is because of this, that I am ever so grateful to have stumbled upon this scholarship opportunity. Without this “excuse” to discuss his service, I would not have had the opportunity to learn about his selfless role defending my country. Further yet, I would not have had the opportunity to further develop my relationship with him in this area. Thank you to all the soldiers who have sacrificed so much, we are grateful for you!
Works Cited


