My Grandfather, My Hero, A Vietnam Veteran

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Vietnam, where a thirteen-year war was fought was as my grandfather described a place some people saw as beautiful while others saw it only as a place of death, destruction, and horror. It was the location of events that I did not know much about until I spoke with my grandfather. It and the war that took place there is not taught about or discussed in detail in school.

My grandfather would talk about being a Vietnam War veteran, but I did not realize what this truly meant until I became older. I listened to his stories, thoughts and feelings which helped me understand the controversy surrounding the war; the impact and lasting effects it had on the soldiers returning from that war.

My grandfather came from a family of World War II veterans which included his father and three uncles. For him, joining the army was not unusual but expected. His dream was to be able to go to college and become an Army officer. While he first thought about becoming a doctor, he eventually decided that he wanted to be a lawyer. In 1961, he was admitted to University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and joined the Army ROTC program. This program allowed students to receive training to become officers in the United States Army. During my grandfather’s four years in college, he accomplished his dual objective of obtaining a college degree and receiving his commission in the United States Army.

After completing his undergraduate degree as a political science major, he was appointed as a Second Lieutenant and was assigned to both the infantry and military intelligence branches. The army allowed him to obtain his law degree from Marquette University and he graduated on June 6, 1968. He then received orders to report to Ft. Benning, Georgia. After completing infantry officer training at Ft. Benning, he was assigned to Ft. Holabird, Maryland US Army Intelligence School. At Ft. Holabird, he received training as a counter-intelligence agent. Upon completion of this training, my grandfather was assigned to do intelligence work in New York City. It was during this time the United States was expanding
the war in Vietnam and the American public was increasing their opposition to the war and the soldiers who fought it.

In June of 1969, my grandfather received his orders for Vietnam. Because of his orders, he had to report to Long Binh Vietnam for further assignment. When he left, his first daughter was only one and a half years-old and my grandmother was pregnant with my mother. When my grandfather received his orders, he was filled with fear and uncertainty, unsure whether he would come back alive. On July 26, 1969 he said goodbye to his family and left for Vietnam.

When my grandfather arrived in Vietnam, he was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 525th Military Intelligence Group and was promoted to Captain. He was assigned to lead a ten-man team whose job was to gather intelligence. He was assigned to a landing zone between Pleiku and Kontum which was in the Central Highlands. The war in the Central Highlands was being heavily fought in its jungles and mountains. It was an area of both high temperatures, humidity and even cold temperatures. There were bugs, snakes, water buffalo, and strange animals that the soldiers had to watch out for. When not in the field, he spent his time in barrack-like structures known as “hooches.” When my grandfather and his team were on the landing zone, they ate prepared military food and while in the field ate “C” Rations that were at times, 20 years old. They also ate LRRP Rations. These rations were packed in pouches, when water was added the food was supposedly edible. According to my grandfather, they tasted like wet cardboard. He anxiously awaited care packages from home which always included Spam, his favorite food at that time. He always looked forward going to Pleiku Air Force Base to eat meals in a mess hall. It was a luxury at the time, to eat real food. It was simple things like eating cooked food, taking showers, shaving and walking around in underwear that made the situation bearable. He recalls always being hot and sweaty. He vividly remembers having to always carry and use a weapon to protect himself. It created a haunting and lasting memory of the sensation of pressing the trigger of his gun no matter if it were the first time or the last. He remembers even more the people he served with.
One of the greatest difficulties he experienced were the constant reminders of the disapproval of the American public. The Americans back home forgot that the soldier fighting the war was not the bad guy. Newspapers, radio and television back home kept up a “drumbeat” that the war and those who fought it were wrong. It didn’t matter if the soldiers thought what they were doing was necessary and right.

My grandfather looked forward to letters and care packages from home which helped him stay sane. The most exciting news he received from home, was while out in the field on January 9, 1970. A Red Cross officer came to him and said, “Captain Reich, you have a new daughter and she is crippled.” This was a pleasant, yet shocking, way for my grandfather to learn of the birth of his second daughter, my mother. When he got back to Pleiku, he was able to call my grandmother and learned that his new born daughter had a club foot. Again, he dreaded the thought he would never get to meet and hold his new daughter. The story of my mother being born is one I hear quite often. I never really understood how truly scary this must have been for my grandmother and grandfather. My grandmother was also fighting a war at home, a war of emotions of having to care for two children alone and possibly never seeing my grandfather again. I cannot even fathom the fear and sadness that must have been felt by my grandparents. My mother’s birth brought happiness to a family that was constantly living with the unknown. Each day my grandmother feared that there would be the dreaded knock of death at the door. The knock that symbolized the death of a soldier.

The last five months in Vietnam, my grandfather was involved in intelligence operations in the field. There continued to be a constant cloud of fear and worry that not only hung above him but also on the other soldiers. The fear and anxiety were endless. The little things in life took on new meaning. My grandfather remembers thinking about how a toilet and toilet paper were a luxury and not always available while fighting the war. Each soldier had a countdown calendar to mark off each day that passed and brought them another day closer to being home. Soon, it was the little things in life that took on new meaning. As each day passed, soldiers like my grandfather, waited for their orders to be able to leave the
war and go home. My grandfather’s favorite song at that time was sung by the Animals and included the phrase, “we’ve got to get out of this place.” He wanted to go home.

My grandfather was to leave Vietnam sometime between May and July 1970. In early May, President Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia by American troops. My grandfather and many of the other soldiers that were scheduled to go home wondered what this would mean. Staying in Vietnam longer? The invasion of Cambodia created even more opposition to the war and the soldiers who fought it. Although my grandfather had to stay in Vietnam longer, he finally got his orders to go home in late July 1970. This was the day he had waited for. His countdown calendar was complete!

His trip home was not pleasant. No matter where the plane stopped in the United States, the soldiers were shunned. They were greeted with stares and, in some cases, taunts. My grandfather was sent to Ft Dix, NJ the first leg of his trip. The trip home increased the bitterness he felt. To get to Milwaukee he had to fly from Philadelphia to Chicago then to Milwaukee. When he and five soldiers he was travelling with arrived in Chicago, they were advised they were being removed from the flight to Milwaukee to allow “paying” passengers to be put on the flight. He and the others were told they had to find other transportation. This added to his bitter feelings that lasted a long time.

My grandfather was lucky because his aunt and uncle lived in Chicago and were more than happy to provide a way home. My grandfather met his wife and two daughters, his mother and father and an uncle at a rest stop on the Illinois tollway. They were all able to drive back home to Milwaukee to see the rest of the family. The night he returned, he and my grandmother went to sleep but during the night there was a thunderstorm. According to my grandmother, after an extremely loud bang my grandfather yelled “incoming”, pushed her off the bed and accidently broke her nose.

It was difficult for my grandfather to return to a normal life, especially if he told people he was a Vietnam Veteran. He felt that people looked at him as if he was a druggy, a baby killer, and even a rapist. Many of these views were formed because of what the news media reported and not what might have been
true. People were glued to the television because the Vietnam War was the first war that was televised. The American public only saw what the newscasters and photographers wanted to show, putting the returning soldiers in a bad light. My grandfather was lucky to have a father and three uncles who fought in World War II. He was able to talk with them which helped him overcome early signs of PTSD. It did not eliminate the bitterness he felt towards those who did not support the war. As the years have gone by, my grandfather has eased these bitter feelings. According to him, if he learned anything, war needs to be avoided. If the country decides it needs to go to war, people should support the war effort and the soldiers who fight it. War is dirty, it's messy and people die, but do not blame the soldier but look to the politicians who make the decisions. Vietnam was a nightmare for the soldiers; it was a terrible reality. Ultimately, there was no clear objective to the war; and as a result, there was no support for the war effort or its soldiers.

What an incredible opportunity for me to talk in-depth with my grandfather. I have truly gained a new understanding of the Vietnam War and how it affected the United States and its veterans. No matter what was happening in Vietnam, life continued in the United States. Although the Vietnam War is over, it continues to haunt my grandfather physically and mentally. He was exposed to Agent Orange while he served in Vietnam. He has since been diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma. A blood disease that will sooner or later take his life. In the end, it will make him another casualty of the Vietnam War. My grandfather wears his Vietnam Veteran cap with pride, not worrying anymore what people think. He stands tall, stands proud to be a Vietnam Veteran and I stand right next to him. He has shown me how to be strong in difficult times of sadness and heartache. He has shown me how to persevere in times of weakness. He has shown me how to stand up for what I believe in. One day, I hope to be able to accompany him on an Honor Flight to Washington D.C. He is my grandfather, my hero. As one Vietnam veteran often says to another, "Welcome home."