

Vietnam Scholarship Application - Aaron Alpern

Dates of Service: 1968 - 1970

Military Unit: 25th infantry division

Branch of Service: U.S. Army

In June 1968, immediately after graduating from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), Sidney Morrison was drafted into the United States Military. It was a role he did not plan on pursuing and he had plenty of moral angst when he thought about himself serving in a real war. However, he did not flee to Canada and instead decided his talents would be best served as a medic and conscientious objector. With his decision made, Morrison was soon flown out to Fort Sam Houston to receive his basic military training with the other conscientious objectors. Being an undersized and nerdy kid going into training (based on the photos he showed me I doubt he weighed more than 135 pounds despite being around 6ft), Sidney said the training was grueling and it truly tested his human spirit, but he learned he was more capable of taking on the challenges than he realized. Unfortunately, any sense of optimism he did have would be completely washed away after his deployment.

Sidney was initially deployed to serve as a medic for a company that was protecting a bridge. He saw very little actual fighting during this initial deployment, but he soon grew irritated by the men in his battalion. At the time, he felt like he did not belong, and did not deserve to be there. Sidney was a Renaissance man, interested in the arts, music, and learning in a broader sense. Even while visiting his home a few weeks ago I was soothed by the classical music he played in the background throughout our discussion and he made it easy to picture how these interests might have clashed with the troops around him. He came from a more affluent background and openly admitted to completely looking down upon the people he was serving with for being immature and oftentimes brainless. However, war and the destruction he saw would soon completely change his perspective.

After defending the bridge for some time, the company started to get deployed from the air to scope out and report about different regions within Vietnam. They had to get used to monsoons so thick that they could not see the soldier in front of them, blood-sucking leeches, bugs, and massive snakes within the jungles. On one of these deployments, while patrolling a road, a man in his company was completely dismembered by a landmine. Sidney tried to help him, but tragically, only a torso and head remained and there was nothing left for him to do. Seeing death so close to him forced Sidney to see the humanity in his fellow troops and he was able to appreciate the brotherhood that came from being in the military. He described the tremendous amount of guilt he felt when he realized he was being a "class bigot". Morrison learned that people can not control anything but themselves, and their reactions to their environment. His initial reservations about serving were rooted in a belief that by serving he would be a catalyst for human death and suffering. Paradoxically, he realized the only way he could save lives was by taking his job as the sole medic in the company more seriously. No matter what was going on around him, he wanted to be there to keep his men living. In this way, the death of that one soldier completely changed Morrison's outlook on his moral duty to service. In his future missions, he went the extra mile to make sure everyone was well-hydrated and taken care of, thus earning the respect of his team.

On one particular patrol mission, the company found itself in the middle of an active minefield. Many members of the company were injured and Morrison had to go running from soldier to soldier to give them the medical assistance they required. Mind you, he was running around with complete disregard for his personal safety and he said he almost forgot he was in an active minefield. This realization hit him when he heard his Lieutenant yell, "MORRISON STOPPP!!", and about one yard in front of him, there was a landmine. Lucky to still be alive, he emphasized his indebtedness to me for his fallen captain, William Branch, for saving his life. The bravery Sidney showed that day would later earn him the bronze star, but at the time he felt like he was completely unworthy of such an honor. He believed he was simply completing his responsibilities as a medic, but everyone around him was able to see the risk he took by running around that minefield and could appreciate the lives he was able to help save.

After his two years of service, he returned home to a nation that was completely hostile to him. Even though he served without much of a choice, people still hated what he represented. Nobody seemed to care about his nightmares or his aversion to loud noises because he was just seen as a physical representation of the unpopular Vietnam War. This was the aspect of his story that was simply so hard to grasp. After hearing his story and what he had experienced, it was impossible to not have a great deal of respect for his service and the sacrifices he made. Whenever I see Vietnam veterans in the future, I will be sure to welcome them home because it is a courtesy they deserved, but were never granted.

Through hearing Sidney's story, I am definitely more appreciative of the veterans that have served and the current military personnel that are serving this country. We will continue to need more Sydney Morrison's to serve for the protection of our nation, but we will also need support behind the scenes. I'm personally really interested in science and technology, and I now see this potentially intersecting with a moral duty to serve my country to make sure we continue to push the technological frontier to protect this great nation. I was also able to appreciate his story in discovering he was stronger than he initially thought he was during his basic training, because I could relate to that in a more broader sense. After my interview I will always be able to look back on the pictures of that skinny and young Sydney Morrison that served in an unforgiving Vietnam war to remind myself that I can overcome my own challenges. However, one of the main things I was able to take away from his experience is how difficult it is to have enemies when they become human. Seeing family pictures of dead enemy soldiers was particularly difficult for Morrison because he was able to see his own family in their photos. Being able to relate to each other and see that we are all united under a single flag, that of the human race, will prevent senseless wars like the Vietnam War from happening in the future. Even though I want to make sure this nation stays safe for future generations, as a member of the next generation, being a part of this effort for peace is now my responsibility, and it is one I do not take lightly.