

Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53 Scholarship Essay Program 2023
Interview
By Finn Cota

Growing up, I was very close to my grandfather, Timothy Patrick Johnson. I knew he had served in the military and was an airplane mechanic in Vietnam, but I really didn't know much about his experience or what he did. What I did know is that he met his very best friends in the military, and that those men had been his life ever since.

My grandfather, unfortunately, passed away during the Covid-19 pandemic. Because it was a time when gatherings were small, we had a very small memorial service. The only people invited were immediate family, and my grandpa's very best friends, including - William Joseph Ritter (Joe) and Thomas Joseph Deacon (Tom)- the men he had served with. We all traded stories about my grandpa and I got to know them much better. When this essay came about, I thought it was a great opportunity to interview them both while also learning more about my Grandpa.

My Grandpa Tim was born and raised in Westchester, Los Angeles near LAX. When he graduated from high school, he went to El Camino, and then Santa Monica Community College. School was not easy for him, he always said it took him a long time to learn how to study. In 1963, he dropped out and enlisted in the US Air Force as an Airman Basic. He went to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio for basic training and ended up in Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico which is where the story of these two friendships begin.

My Grandpa met Tom & Joe at Holloman Air Force Base in 1964. Joe was from North Hampton, Massachusetts. Tom was actually born and raised in Redondo Beach. The three of them served in the United States Air Force 366th Tactical Fighter Wing. The 366 had three squadrons. My grandpa was in the 391st that went to Cam Ranh Bay, and Tom and Joe were in the 390th, which went to Da Nang. They all went in as Airman Basic at different times and served for four years between 1963 and 1968. They were stationed in Vietnam between 1965 and 1966. When they left the service, my Grandpa was an Airman First Class, Joe was a Senior Airman and Tom was a Sergeant.

All three men worked on different components of the F-4C Phantom bomber-fighter jet in Vietnam. Tom said he worked on the plane's cameras that were used for missile launches. He said all the launches were filmed and that after the film was processed they would go over it in meetings. Joe worked on the autopilot system and would help train and debrief airmen before and after flights. They both said my grandpa worked on flight instruments, which would provide critical information about the flight situation of the F-4C Phantom. The F-4C Phantom flew air-to-air missions against North Vietnamese fighters as well as attacking ground targets.

Despite having different jobs working on the F-4C aircraft, they all worked 12 hour shifts, Noon to Midnight, or Midnight to Noon. Joe said it could be very lonely, and there was not much to do. They could go to the Airman's club for a beer and a sandwich, but they could not leave the

base. Life after their shift was over was simple, mostly going back to the tent, playing cards and having a few drinks. Every once in a while, they were allowed to go on supervised swims in the South China Sea. Both Tom & Joe recounted a time when they faced hostilities from the North Vietcong and headed into the foxholes. Those times were very limited though as it was early in the war.

In Tom's final days in Vietnam, he said there was a party amongst him and his fellow service members who were ecstatic to come home. On the day he was set to leave, he was instructed to wear civilian clothes instead of his uniform as military members fighting in Vietnam were being targeted by US protestors of the war at home.

When Tom returned from Vietnam, his father didn't recognize him. One year of eating rationed meals from the Chow Hall and the extreme conditions had made him thin and aged him beyond his years. He went on to get educated at El Camino, trying his best to assimilate back into society. Tom said he felt Invisible. Society didn't care about the countless lives lost, or the lives destroyed by those who survived. One girl in Tom's class found out that he served, and asked him to speak to her brother, who also served in Vietnam. He agreed, and met with the man who had lost several limbs there. Tom said seeing this veteran like this had made him feel more helpless than he had ever felt before. Tom ultimately joined my grandfather at LMU where they both graduated with a degree in Business. The hardships they faced in the War made them both certain they wanted a future with more opportunities. The two of them both went on to long careers working for public utility companies.

On Joe's return home, his family also did not recognize him. All his clothes were full of mold and holes and needed to be burned. His time in Vietnam matured him tremendously. He had enlisted because he wasn't doing well in school, but now he was ready to get an education. He became the first person at Salem State to be simultaneously on academic probation and the Dean's List, due to his grades prior to enlisting. Joe eventually graduated with a business degree and worked in banking for over 30 years.

In 2012, my Grandpa and Grandma moved to Vero Beach Florida where Joe and his wife Mary Lou lived. About five years ago, Tom and his wife Maggie made a trip out to Florida to visit them both. On the way back from lunch one day, Tom and my grandpa noticed a sign for the Vietnam Wall traveling exhibit and decided to visit. A school group was there, and the teacher asked them if they were both Vietnam Veterans and if they wouldn't mind sharing their experiences with the group of students. They ended up spending an hour with them. Tom said it felt great to finally meet some people who cared to hear about their story.

While there, he said my Grandpa also found the name of a classmate from high school on the wall. He said a volunteer asked if he could provide a photo of the man because the memorial featured photos of most of the men and women killed in Vietnam, but his was missing. My Grandpa made a copy of a photo in his high school yearbook and sent it in so he could be represented.

When they were done, the volunteer asked if they had ever been recognized for their service in the war and both of them said, "No, not really." The volunteer gave them a recognition pin and in that moment, they realized it had been more than 50 years before they had ever been recognized for their service in Vietnam.

Interviewing Tom and Joe was an amazing opportunity to connect to my Grandpa after his passing, while also learning about such a large war that most people my age know very little about. Hearing stories about my Grandpa in his youth while serving from some of his favorite people gave me a part of him I've never had before.

Prior to writing this essay, I knew very little about this part of my Grandpa's life, despite the immense impact it had on him and his friends. It was also very interesting to learn that all three of these men had struggled with college and did not take the traditional route of completing it in four years. Had it not been for their service in Vietnam, they may have never finished college, as that experience prepared them to take their education seriously.

It was very interesting for me to learn about these men who are such a big piece of my family. I didn't know the trauma they underwent meant so little to the public, or that many of the veterans felt invisible or unheard. This was the first time that I heard firsthand accounts of anyone who served in the war. Despite all of the bad that came out of this war, I was very inspired by how it helped shape the lives of Tom, Joe and my Grandpa, and influenced their decision to go to college. But most inspiring to me is the fact that the friendships my Grandpa developed while serving in the military lasted his entire life and carried on all the way until his passing.