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Vietnam Veterans Scholarship Essay

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The Life of Michael Nathe:

My Great Uncle Michael Nathe was born May 27, 1944 in Scobey, Montana – in a nursing home because the closest hospital was hours away. Growing up, Michael Nathe, a West Point Graduate (1967) didn't think he'd be a soldier. Instead, he dreamed of taking over the family farm in Northeastern Montana where his German Catholic parents raised cattle and grew wheat. He was the 5th born of 7 children, all of whom attended a one-room schoolhouse in Redstone, Montana until they completed 8th grade. Many local farm kids finished their formal education at 8th grade since the nearest high schools were an hour away. However, Michael and his siblings went on to Catholic boarding schools in North Dakota to complete a college preparatory curriculum. This was quite remarkable given his parents only completed elementary school educations themselves. His family and community were so full of pride that he was admitted into one of the finest military academies in the world since few young men from Montana ever achieved such an honor.

Michael graduated from West Point as the conflict in Vietnam began escalating, and after training in Georgia and Colorado, he left for Vietnam in the spring of 1968. To commemorate his graduation, he brought himself an Austin Healy sports car, and his parents bought him a Rolex watch. He was engaged to a pretty, nurse named Lynn from Kansas, and they planned to return to Montana after Vietnam to help his newly widowed mother run the family farm. His life seemed

full of promise. On the night of August 27th, 1968, only 2 months after arriving in Vietnam, Michael and his platoon were near Hoc Mon, about 10 miles northwest of Saigon. They came under fire and Michael was shot, as were several of his men. They were airlifted to Cu Chi Military Hospital, and sometime during the 15-minute helicopter flight, Lieutenant Michael Nathe took his last breath. His family was notified, and his body arrived 2 days later to the funeral home in Plentywood, Montana. The military requested family confirm his identity since, under such difficult war-time circumstances, mistakes happened. His oldest brother was relieved when the body bag was opened and he saw a man he believed to be Asian. After two days in Vietnam's sweltering heat and humidity, Michael's body was bloated beyond recognition, and his facial features swollen, and misshapen. His brother hoped for a mistake, but then noticed Michael's distinct hand birthmark, and the family trademark "unibrow."

What I've pieced together of Michael Nathe's life comes from interviews with my grandma and uncles, reading the 6 letters he wrote home while in Vietnam, and from communication with one of his fellow soldiers --the last person to see him alive. In his letters home, he writes about a number of places that seem foreign and far away --the Black Virgin Mountain in Tay Ninh Province, and base camps in Cu Chi, Bien Hoa, Long Bien, and Hoc mon. In his early letters, he talks about mundane things like Vietnam's sweltering heat and a mascot dog they named Rosie who had been wandering around their camp. He asks about the weather in Montana, how the crops are doing, and if his brother has gotten the oil changed in his Austin Healy. But, with each successive letter, his normally light mood becomes increasingly more serious. In one letter home, he states, "another thing, could you have our lawyer draw up a will for me?" He begins to give away items to family members in case he doesn't make it home. He

wants to make sure his fiancé receives his cows, and he worries about “the government loans she has for school.” He requests that his immediate younger brother have his Austin-Healey, and the youngest brother receive his \$10,000 life insurance for his college education. He wants his sister (my grandmother) to make sure she gives his one-year old nephew and godchild (my uncle, also named Michael), his Rolex watch. He begins to reference the mental health of some in his unit, saying, “one of the kids who came over here with me cracked the other night during a mortar attack.” He closes some letters with, “say a prayer to St. Jude for me, okay?” referencing his favorite saint – the Catholic Saint of impossible cases and the Saint of the hopeless.

Over the years, Michael Nathe’s surviving siblings have connected with various members of his platoon, and in the summer of 2021 John Quatroke (Vietnam, May 1, 1967 – October, 1968; platoon 2, battalion 14th infantry, B company) attended the Nathe Family reunion on the farm in Northeastern Montana to meet the family of his one-time platoon leader. Over the years, he has remained a friend and source of comfort for my grandmother and her siblings. It has been part of his own healing to reach out to the families of soldiers he personally knew ---to let them know what kind of people their loved ones were with at the time of their death, and to give them eyewitness accounts. He said he was “always thinking about the people you’ve lost and the life experiences they missed and the ultimate price they paid.”

John Quatroke was drafted in May, 1967 and sent to 2 months of training in Ft. Leonard Wood, and another 3 months of infantry training at Fort Polk. When arriving in Bien Hoa airport in October, 1967 he recalls a “blast of heat” and “the stench of an unsanitary smell.” He discussed his time patrolling the Saigon river, extensive booby traps, and becoming a sergeant in charge of a fire team. By April and May of 1968, Michael Nathe was his replacement platoon

leader. His memories and recollections of my great uncle were limited ---their respective ranks made it unlikely that they would fraternize much. And, “the Lieutenant,” as he referred to him, was one of several men to have led the platoon during his 12+ months in Vietnam. He remembered he was from a farm in Montana, and that he gave him less risky tasks because he was only 2 months away from finishing and wanted him to make it home to see his family. He recalled that he was modest and humble, and he appreciated that, despite being an officer, “the Lieutenant” valued the skills it took to stay alive for over 10 months. “The Lieutenant” told him he wanted to learn everything he knew so that he, too, could make it home alive. He also remembered the “considerable heavy action” and “losing quite a few men” during the spring and summer of 1968, including losing his best friend the same night as “the Lieutenant.”

My experience writing this essay has been enlightening and transformative. My great uncle has been an integral part of my family’s history and legacy. His uniforms from West Point hang in a closet in the family farmhouse where my grandmother grew up. His framed medals hang on the living room walls. His Austin Healy, rusted and with 4 flat tires, sits partially covered by a tarp in a Quonset, next to farming equipment. And, his West Point White uniform and cadet hat rest on a mannequin in the Sheridan County Museum in Plentywood, along with the newspaper from August 28th, 1968 with the front page emblazoned with “LT. MICHAEL L. NATHE DIES IN VIETNAM.” His memory is very much alive among my grandmother and her siblings. So, it has been a special personal journey to read Michael Nathe’s letters, and to talk about his life and death with those who knew him best...and those who barely knew him at all, but were with him as he died.

In 2018, 50 years after his death, my family and I accompanied my mom on a work trip to Vietnam where we traveled to Cu Chi, the Black Virgin Mountain, and other areas Michael cited in his letters. It seemed sadly ironic that while my mom worked at the university in Saigon as part of a joint US-Vietnam government project, my grandmother laid flowers in the Cu Chi jungle, and said a prayer to St. Jude for her fallen brother. Through my interviews and readings, I've learned that Michael's death still stings, and that those who loved him still feel his loss, even decades later. I've learned that war is tragic for all involved, not only for the ones who are killed in action, but for those who survive and spend their lives providing comfort and closure to families in need of answers. And, I've learned that our political "enemies" one decade might just be our political "allies" the next, and that when governments are battling, it is their individual citizens that are usually the collateral. While I am disheartened that I never got to meet my great uncle Michael, I have learned a lot as I reflect on the meaning of his life and death for my family.