

*Jonathan Duska*

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As someone considering studying political science, education, or history in college, I was truly grateful for the opportunity to interview Kirby Shapiro, a decorated member of the United States Army, 1st Cavalry Division, on November 10th, 2024. Although Kirby did not serve in Vietnam in the same unit as my great-grandfather Richard, my discussion with Kirby made me immediately think of him. I have always admired him for his service. Unfortunately, my great-grandfather passed away before I was born, so I appreciate Kirby's willingness to take the time to tell his story. I know that many veterans find it difficult to share their experiences. I am grateful for Kirby's time and candor and have so much respect for him. I hope that I have done Kirby's story some justice, as it is so important to recognize his sacrifice and dedication to our country.

Kirby was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1947. This is also where he grew up. In 1965, Kirby attended a Chicago Junior College. Kirby received his draft notice in the late spring of 1966. At the time, he did not have enough hours completed for college, so he requested that he receive the rest of the summer to complete them. His request was granted, and as a result, Kirby spent the summer working two jobs and completing his required hours. On August 31, 1966, he was assigned to attend boot camp in Kentucky.

Kirby completed his basic training in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and then went into advanced infantry training at Fort Ord, California. Kirby described the experience at boot camp as the physical and mental breakdown of the soldiers and the rebuilding of the men into the image of a soldier that the Army wanted. They often utilized push-ups as a main method to physically break down the soldiers whenever they did something incorrectly. One day, a Sergeant at boot camp ordered Kirby to drop down and do ten push-ups. Kirby told the sergeant that he bet he could do more push-ups than him, though Kirby had been doing them all day. The sergeant took on the challenge and they both stepped outside. Kirby and the sergeant started doing push-ups until the sergeant could no longer continue. Afterward, the sergeant

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shook Kirby's hand and told him that he was a man of his word. Kirby appreciated this sergeant since he could have acted more negatively toward Kirby.

After boot camp, Kirby was deployed to Vietnam in 1967 in the Central Highlands area as part of the 1st Cavalry Division. Kirby shared a story about a fellow infantryman. This particular soldier was always nervous and jittery. As they were marching, he thought he heard enemy movement. In all likelihood, it was an animal, and he overreacted by throwing a hand grenade. The soldier threw this grenade improperly, and it bounced upwards and exploded. As a result, this same soldier was later sent to the rear to move supplies; a less risky job. This incident demonstrated that not everyone in Vietnam was fit to be on the front lines, especially those who lacked self-control and discipline.

Kirby also talked about the conditions that he and his fellow soldiers were subjected to in Vietnam. He recalled the humidity, the rain, and the leeches that would be all over. He described jungle rot (tropical ulcers), which is when blisters form and scab over, typically on the lower limbs. He recalled that the intense heat would cause soldiers to sweat so profusely, the scabs would slide off. Kirby described how water had to be rationed with four one-quart canteens per person. Oftentimes, people would often drink too much water right away and not have enough water for the rest of the day. Since they had to ration their water carefully, they did not have the luxury of brushing their teeth or washing their hands. Even if someone was wounded and a soldier had blood on his hands, he would use the same unwashed hands to eat rations. I was shocked by how horrid these conditions were and even more moved by the fact that the soldiers had no choice but to adapt to these conditions.

Kirby also shared the story of a fairly new U.S. soldier who had been positioned ahead of the crew, scouting for ambushes from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). The U.S. soldier then saw one of the NVA and shot and killed him. This deceased NVA had a photo with his wife and children, which the U.S. soldier found. Later on, the soldier went off alone and cried. He was in anguish over killing a man



that he had nothing against except for the country he was fighting for. Whenever the soldiers had to kill in battle, they did so because they had no choice. When Kirby told me this story, he gave credit to the soldier for his humanity, since he cared about what he had done. War is tragic; soldiers are asked to do a job and lives are lost for a perceived greater good.

When I asked Kirby about other people he had served with, he recalled a man they called "Pineapple," since he was from Hawaii. They would often give out nicknames for each other, though Kirby told me that with his own name, he did not need a nickname. He recalled that one day in early 1967, he and Pineapple were joking on the trail about what they would do after they got out of Vietnam, like going to a bar. Later that day, during a firefight, Pineapple was killed. At the time, Kirby did not know his real name, but he later found out that his name was Gary Kawamura. Kirby explained his shock and daze throughout the rest of the day. His death served as a reminder that anyone, at any time could lose their life. To this day, it fills Kirby with sorrow to think of Gary, though this incident happened so long ago. During the same firefight, another soldier in Kirby's company was injured. The rest of Kirby's company all hid behind the bushes, while the injured soldier was pleading for help, begging for his fellow soldiers not to leave him. It should be noted that when a soldier is shot, it is not like the movies that we see today. Injured soldiers often scream and completely lose control of bodily function. So, Kirby ran out and dragged him to safety and saved the man. Kirby explained to me that anyone would have saved this man and that none of them would consider themselves brave or heroic for this act. He told me that they would just do it without question because it was the right thing to do. It was part of the job.

Toward the end of his time in Vietnam, Kirby shared that he had developed a mindset that he could not be killed. There was somewhat of a disconnect from reality. When he was being fired at, he was supposed to get down. However, he would often be standing up, and his company would have to

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remind him to get down. I cannot imagine the impact Vietnam would have on mental health and the detachment from understanding how dangerous things were. It certainly altered a soldier's senses and basic reactions of fight, flight, or freeze.

With four months of active service duty remaining, Kirby returned to the United States. He was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, along with other Vietnam infantry veterans. At this point, Kirby was a Sergeant E-5. During his time at Fort Knox, Kirby had a few negative encounters with a First Sergeant. One example of this occurred in the summer when the men were tasked with cutting the grass. Although it was a simple task, it was made difficult because the men were given sickles to do so. At one point, the men sat down and took a break. The First Sergeant came along and questioned Kirby as to why they were not working. Kirby pointed out that it was extremely hot and that they had been given inefficient means to cut the grass. After all, taking a break seemed like a reasonable thing to do given the circumstances. It did not seem like a fair criticism from the First Sergeant. Another story from that summer was when the soldiers were tasked with cleaning up a road on a very hot day. They had to load rubbish up onto an army truck. A few miles down the road, the sergeant approached Kirby with a can that they had missed picking up on the road. Kirby asked the First Sergeant to just put it onto the truck, but the sergeant ordered them to go back and start over. In both of these instances, Kirby considered the First Sergeant to be hassling his men for no good reason.

In 1968, Kirby finished his tour of duty and returned home to a suburb near Chicago, as a decorated member of the Army. He described his reunion with his family as perfectly fine. Kirby told me that some of his family had been quite happy to see him, specifically his uncles who had served in World War II. Kirby never had any negative experiences with people after he came home. People thanked him for his service and still do today, though he sometimes is unsure why. He depicted his time

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with the Army as just doing his job. To this day, he is not sure why he survived while others did not. It all seemed to be purely a matter of chance to him.

Post Vietnam, Kirby worked for a year in the buying department of a mail-order firm. In 1969, he left this job to attend Loyola University as an English major, with plans to be a teacher. However, after two years, he decided that he could not attend college anymore, due to a new job that had him working 30 hours a week on top of being a full-time student. The cost of college in addition to his rent, utilities, car payments, food, and insurance was just too much to balance. Kirby remained in Chicago until his retirement in 2003, after which he moved to Shawano; near the Wolf River, so he could kayak and canoe.

During the Vietnam War, over 2.7 million US troops had been in battle, resulting in over 58,000 fatalities and over 300,000 wounded. These numbers do not capture the other ongoing impacts of war on families, physical and mental health, perceptions of government, and views of other countries. That is why it is very critical to learn from others and ask about their experiences. I am very thankful for the time Kirby gave to me and for trusting me with his story. What most impressed me throughout our conversation was how genuine Kirby was. I know Kirby is a very kind and humble man, but the truth of the matter is that he is a hero who has given selflessly to our country, just like my great-grandfather and everyone else who served honorably during the war.

I cannot imagine being a little older than I am currently and serving in such an intensely polarizing conflict like the Vietnam War. Unlike in the war movies that we see today, many of these soldiers who served were barely adults, not even old enough to drink by today's standards. The sacrifices made by the soldiers and their families are immeasurable, as is the bravery and valor exemplified by Kirby in his service to our country.