

*Katelyn Smits*

### My Grandpa's story

I knew my grandpa, Gene McInn served in the air force since I was a baby. But it was something we never really talked about. So when I was presented with this opportunity to learn more about my grandpa I could not turn it down. He answered my call from a motel room on his way down to Florida with my grandma. My grandparents are highschool sweethearts. My grandma was with my grandpa every step of the way. She answered questions right alongside my grandpa. And here is the story they shared with me.

My grandpa knew he would be drafted to the army. He wanted to control his own fate though, so taking his older brother's advice he enlisted in the Air Force. After he graduated he went out to basic in San Antonio, Texas at Lackland. Soon he finished his basic training and headed off to his assignment. My grandpa served at Travis Air Force, "the gateway to the pacific" from January nineteen sixty-six to May of nineteen sixty-nine, where he got out seven to eight months early. My grandpa never set foot in Vietnam. He served in a different way.

My grandpa's primary job was being a driver. He would drive around staff cars for generals. He even drove a few celebrities to the airports. He recalls driving actors Christopher and Linda George, Jockey Willie Shoemaker, and the comedian Martha Raye and her daughter. He also taught drivers ed for military driver licenses for around a year and half. Like your normal drivers ed he would teach you the do's and don'ts and intricacies of driving a military vehicle. He would even give the driving test. But there was a war going on. Not everyone was as fortunate as my grandpa was, as he was safe on American soil.

My grandpa and grandma were apprehensive on the subject, something I have known about since I could understand the brutality of war. My grandma tried to stop my conversation. My grandpa clearly did not want to share details but thought I had a right to know about the

history of my country. My grandpa also would drive the dead. He recalls unloading the bodies of the country's fallen at night, twelve am to five am, to try to hide the death toll from the American people. He and others would unload the bodies from the planes to half ton military trucks. These bodies he told me could be a day old or two-three months. They would be cold, around forty degrees so they could make it home to their families. My grandpa still remembers where he took them, building 1212. It was the size of a football field . The building would be full. This is where he would say goodbye to these young soldiers. My grandpa never left the base with the bodies to do burial details. And all of those soldiers never left him.

I asked my grandpa about what he was doing, and how he felt about it. To him it was just another job. He worked five days a week like a normal office worker. He was working a job. He saw it as his duty to his country to help. However, after further conversation I realized there was sadness hidden underneath his words. He was doing a service for his country. The atrocities he was witnessing was nothing compared to what he knew his fellow soldiers were experiencing in Vietnam. My grandpa thought it was not only his duty, but everyone's duty to serve. News he would hear about deserters distressed him. He disagreed with protesters. Like many I have had the chance to talk to over the course of my life, the sentiment was the same. "We are soldiers, we had no choice, we just did it." He was part of one of the sixty squadrons on his base.

And just like a normal job my grandpa was paid. He told me he made seventy-eight dollars a month before my grandma met him out in California and married him. They would send letters almost every day to each other. Once in a great while they would splurge and talk on the phone for two to three dollars. But soon my grandma met him out in California. They got an apartment in California together for seventy-five dollars a month. The clear consensus of the apartment was that it was terrible but it's what the housing allotment allowed for. After he

stopped eating at the food hall he would get to bring home an additional thirty-eight dollars a month. He says at this point he was making around two hundred dollars a month. My grandpa used this money to support his new wife.

He served for about three and a half years. His rank was an E4 sergeant and he received the award the Good Conduct Presidential Award. He got to leave early due to all of the enlistment during nineteen sixty nine. When he and my grandma made it back home, a job was waiting for him.

Grandpa worked at Barber and Coleman in Rockford, Illinois before leaving for the military. Under law they held his spot for him to return to when he got back. They even sent him vacation checks every year as well. He even told me he felt guilty about not returning. But after being across the country from his family, he just wanted to be with them. So he would end up working in my Great Grandpa Tod's garage.

Grandpa Tod was family, he was also a fellow veteran, which was no doubt a comfort to my Grandpa Gene. Grandpa Tod served in the Navy during World War Two, so they shared a common sense of duty. That included keeping my grandma happy. Grandpa Gene would work there and be a car salesman for thirty seven years. During this time he would help raise two girls, my mom and my aunt. Neither my mom or aunt served in the military, however, my grandpa's ideals would be passed on to his grandchildren. My brother would be the first since my grandpa to join the service. To my grandpa's dismay, but my Grandpas Tod's pleasure, it would be with the Naval Academy. My grandpa is very proud of my brother and loves telling all his friends at the V.F.W.

Thirty-seven years after my grandpa's service he is still an active participant in his local V.F.W. Every time the national anthem plays he stands and salutes. I still see the look of pride