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My Grandpa - Thomas Leverenz

War is something we all hear about. We read about it in history class and we listen to presentation after presentation about the elements of it. We watch the news and read articles that all describe where this war is taking us as a nation. But very few get to witness and experience war first hand. Only the most brave men and women in America travel across the world, serving and fighting for our country. One of those few brave souls was my grandpa, Tom Leverenz.

Thomas Leverenz was born in Burlington, Wisconsin. He moved all across Wisconsin with his family of eight. He was bullied as a kid and often wondered if he was a coward. If he fought back, would that make him less of a coward, strong even? He wasn't sure, so he just took what the bullies gave him and moved on.

Ever since he was young, he strived to be a pilot. In high school, he found himself reading a magazine in the library. He stopped when he noticed an ad. In the picture, there was two men walking away from a Huey Helicopter with their flight gear on. The caption read, "Who says high school grads can't be pilots? Not the Army." Below the ad was recruiting information. He was immediately hooked. This was perfect for Tom. He was truly scared of college. His interests were so broad and picking just one major was not an option for him. Tom decided that this was his clear shot at becoming what he always dreamed to be.

When he informed his parents of his decision, he received two very different responses. His mother was horrified. She had grown up during World War II and some of her closest friends never returned. She also had seen the count of those who died in Vietnam each week. Some nearing as high as 300 a week. His father, on the other hand, was very proud of his decision. He

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himself wanted to join the military but never got the chance. When his son revealed his intentions, he encouraged him to pursue his goals. Later on, two of his brothers followed and joined the military. Tom said there was only a few things that he feared. One of those was fear of failure. If he would have been shot, his life would have been over. However, he wasn't concerned with his own life. He was more afraid of doing something stupid and hurting someone else. He was told that if he remained silent and wasn't a stand out, he would get through just fine.

He took all the tests for Flight School during Easter vacation of his senior year of high school in 1968. The local recruiter put him on a bus to Milwaukee and that is where he took the Flight Aptitude Screening Test and a flight physical. Tom went on active duty after he turned 18 that fall. Shortly after, he went through Basic Training. Then he began Flight School in 1969. He eventually requested an additional school to learn how to fly a bigger Helicopter, known as a Chinook or a CH-47. He soon began his journey over to Vietnam in 1970. In Vietnam, this area of operations was what was called "Four Core". The country was broken up into four roughly equal parts numbered from the North to the South. Four Core was between Saigon and the southern tip of Vietnam. He flew support missions all over that area. This included flying in Vietnam every other day. When he flew, he would get a clipboard full of missions. Each was lined with coordinates where they had to go get a load of supplies, and coordinates where they had to be delivered. It also had the name of the unit and the radio frequency that was used to communicate with the drop off location. Usually, the mission list lasted about 8 hours but some ran 10 or even 15 hours. He never fooled around because he didn't want to put his Flight Status or Aircraft Commander status at stake. He got shot up a few times, had two engine failures, and had one engine runaway high side on the ground but never made a fool of himself.

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Before his return, Tom was aware of the turmoil the United States was in. The citizens were rioting and protests were taking place. But Tom knew why he was there. He thought of it this way. If your friend came and told you that there was someone in their house, you would help them get rid of the intruder. The war had the same idea. The South Vietnamese were allies of the US and the Americans were helping them get rid of the enemy. So when Tom returned, he knew he made the right choice despite what rioters said.

When asked about his entire experience, he replied, "To be honest, my tour in Vietnam was better than I had expected. I got a lot of flight time and I loved the flying. The country itself has some beautiful white sand beaches and a lot of muddy water in the Mekong River. Our missions were mostly supported where we did not really have a lot of shooting going on most of the time so it was pretty safe too. I extended an extra month and a half to get closer to the start of my freshman year of college. I know if I came home early I would goof off and spend my college money. Clearly, nobody was going to hire me for such a short time and by staying in Vietnam I earned an extra \$1000 to use for my college fund."

After his service, Tom felt he had become independent, responsible and self-reliant. Others told him that he left a boy, and came back a man. After only 30 days being home, he was on a college campus. He attended the University of Wisconsin - Madison, where he met my grandma, Annola. Due to the start of a family, Tom didn't have much time to see his comrades until 30 years after serving. He talked to a few of his fellow soldiers and realized how blessed he was to have a family and to be successful after his time in Vietnam. His friends had suffered from some PTSD and other medical problems. He still keeps in touch with some of them through email and reunions.

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As an 18 year old boy, my grandpa gave up his time to fight for the country he loves. He was willing to put his life at risk for not just his comrades, but also his family at home. By doing so, he also fulfilled his childhood dream of becoming a pilot. I will always look to my grandpa as a model for courage, sacrifice, and respect.