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Interview Scholarship Essay

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The Unsung Heroes

Obviously, war is a difficult topic to discuss. We absorb information in school through our history courses, memorizing blunt facts ranging from the number of casualties, to the cities where major battles occurred. All this information, taught, accepted, recorded, and written about in research papers to be handed in solely for a gradebook disregards the primary sources we have access to: the people around us who served. When we learn these facts in school, it is easy to forget that this "ancient" history occurred less than 60 years ago; furthermore, that we have grandparents, uncles, and other relatives that experienced firsthand the history we read in books. Suddenly, the cold facts we memorize for tests expand to a broader comprehension. The stories we read are the memories of a soldier, similar to our relatives that served. Through this scholarship, I had an opportunity to interview my grandfather, who fought in Vietnam from September of 1966 through September of 1967.

My grandpa, Donald Zilisch, was 20 years old when he was drafted into the military. At the time, his brother was serving in Thailand, and he knew it was only a matter of time before he was drafted himself. Since the Vietnam War was never officially declared, families were allowed to draft more than one sibling and he was drafted no more than six months later. Although unhappy with the invitation from Uncle Sam, he was obligated to serve his country. "That's just what it was. There was no way around it, I was obligated, and it was my duty." After the

completion of basic training, he was sent to Fort Gordon, Georgia for two months for Advanced Infantry Training, and then to Airborne Training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Six months of training and preparing, and then he was sent to Vietnam.

He arrived in Vietnam in Camron Bay. Originally, he spent his first few weeks working in inventory due to the influx of soldiers. Then, he was sent to the 101st Unit, assigned specifically to search and destroy missions. I asked my grandfather what the most shocking change was to him, initially. Not only had his life, along with thousands of other young men's lives, been completely uprooted with the delivery of a single letter, but he was then sent to an entirely new environment with strangers. He recounted his first experience stepping off the plane in Vietnam. "It was like putting your head in an oven," a shocking contrast to the typical weather of Beaver Dam, his hometown. Likewise, this was the first time he had been exposed to a third world country. Little kids ran around with sores on their heads, while mothers would pull down what little clothes they had in the middle of a street to defecate. In America, we are grossly unaccustomed to the lifestyle that third world countries exist in. Even in the poorest and most dangerous part of our country, we have running water. We have public restrooms and organizations created to aid poverty stricken areas. Soldiers in Vietnam had to learn how to cope with this cultural change. Comparatively however, that was the easy part. They also had to deal with the realities of war.

For twelve months, which my grandfather called a "tour," he was part of search and destroy missions with the 101st Unit. Moreover, the Vietcong, consisting mostly of local villagers from the north who were recruited by the government, encouraged women and children to carry the ammunition for them in the hopes that the US would be less likely to shoot a child compared to a young man. My grandpa commented quickly that it is more difficult to shoot a woman and



child, but, just like anything, you become desensitized. “After the first time, it doesn’t make a difference. That’s all I’m going to say about that.”

In the combat unit, you were expected to carry at least eighty pound packs in the scorching heat every day. Learning about his daily life during his time in the military helped me understand why he always keeps so much food in his house. Whenever we leave some food on our plate at Thanksgiving dinner, my grandpa comments on it or finishes whatever food we chose not to eat. He has a freezer full of extra food in the basement even though my grandparents have more than enough food in their house to feed themselves. Due to his past experiences, wasting food was a ridiculous notion since he endured the absence of plentiful resources throughout his tour. We talked about the constant stress, the weather conditions varying from scorching heat and monsoon rain storms, the diseases, and the psychological pressure of every moment. While you did not want to make enemies, creating meaningful friendships with those around you was difficult because if they died, it would be harder for you to recover. Every connection made was a matter of survival; you had to protect yourself, so everyone in your unit was an acquaintance yet no one was an enemy. You were already focused on the bullets coming from in front of you, you did not need to fear a bullet coming from behind you as well.

During the interview, my grandpa recalled an encounter with a Vietnamese individual who was not a member of the Vietcong nor the National Vietnamese Army. They were the Vietnamese the United States were sent to protect from the oppression of communism. However, when they saw my grandpa, they shook with fear. They had never seen a white person before, let alone a white person carrying a machine gun. American soldiers were fighting in a foreign land, losing thousands of soldiers to protect the concept of freedom for a group that had never experienced it.



“For them, freedom was the communists coming and taking their food and their young men...I never saw a young man, only small boys and old men. The rest were forced to join the army.” That was all they had ever known. In the US, we have a tangible perception of freedom. It is written in our constitution, seen in the streets of my hometown, and defended in the courtrooms of the state. Unlike other countries, our freedom was a right that was fought for and earned with bloodshed an ocean away, unknown to the common civilian.

My grandfather finished out his military contract as part of the 82nd Unit, riot training, after being sent back to the United States. Then, he went home to Beaver Dam, where he applied to be a Highway Patrolman. He became a lifetime member of the VFW, the Legion, and a separate branch of the legion called the 40 and 8. In addition to the ribbons he received from serving in Vietnam, my grandfather was awarded a CIB (Combat Infantry Badge) and an Airborne Parachute Badge acquired upon completion of the three week training. As challenging as the war was, assimilation to society in the 1970s contained it's own set of challenges. Describing himself as “hard,” my grandpa commented that it took almost fifteen years for him to completely mellow out. At that point in time, PTSD was not recognized as a disorder. People wanted returning vets to simply go back to normal. But what was normal? How do you revert back to such a drastically different lifestyle when the past twelve months you lived one day at a time, infused with fear and adrenaline and suffering? While some veterans took their own lives in the years that followed their leave, others took drugs to cope. My grandpa explained it like this: what you call migraines here, we called minor headaches there. The medic would give a suffering soldier a level three painkiller to provide relief for the moment. Short term relief led to a lifetime of addiction problems for veterans everywhere. Inquiring about his opinion on post-service resources provided to aid soldiers