

#12

Emma Strick

Virginia Nuske

Vietnam Vets of America Nuske Memorial Scholarship

January 29th, 2019

Vietnam and Vulnerability

Twice in my interview with my grandpa, he mentioned crying. I'm sure this is not unique; war and tears are often associated with each other. It was the lessons, deep-rooted in his character and his life story, and the language he used which made the tears profound and which stuck with me.

My grandpa and I drove to Barnes and Noble together for our interview. We didn't discuss anything Vietnam-related on the way there, mostly small talk. I felt the trepidation in the car—my fear of awkwardness, his fear of the spotlight. When we arrived at the bookstore's cafe, I ordered a drink and he ordered a coffee and an oatmeal-raisin cookie. He held a beige file at his side, I held a typed list of questions and a pen. It turns out I wouldn't really need them.

My grandpa is not a large man. He has a face that never seems far from a smile and has bright blue eyes, like most of my family members. I started with my basic questions, things about himself at the time of Vietnam and why he enlisted, but soon he was steering his answers toward the things he clearly needed to talk about. He told me that he had started his college career as an engineering student at Marquette University, where he worked hard and didn't need to worry about the draft. But as his classes increased in difficulty and he wasn't getting the grades he had previously earned, he felt like he was wasting his parents' money. He soon left

#12

Marquette and began taking classes at The University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. One morning on his drive to church he got into a car crash and didn't wake up for three days. Once he recovered, he lived at home and no longer attended college. He knew that his draft immunity was gone and those in the draft were going into the army—right where he didn't want to end up. He decided to enlist in the Air Force instead, thinking he'd have more control.

First, he tells me, blue eyes sparkling, that he went to a doctor. The doctor observed incredulously that my grandfather weighed only 124 pounds; the minimum was 125. The doctor told him that he could be written off as ineligible for the draft. "How badly do you want to go?"

My grandpa answered, "I want to go." Partly, he tells me, this was because of a sense of patriotic duty, but also because his father had died while they hadn't been speaking to each other. In a way, he wanted to get away from the city that reminded him of his mistakes. He figured that heroism would be an effective distraction.

Now he says, "God, I was arrogant." This wasn't helped by a man at the recruitment office who said that my grandpa was smart enough to get any job he wanted in the Air Force. That settled it. He sold his prized convertible (figuring he'd die anyway and, nobly, didn't want his mother to have to sell it when he was gone). My grandpa was off to war, a pound too light and without a car, and instead, a pocket full of cash and a big head. *Something was bound to go wrong*, I'm thinking, across from him at the table, stealing bits of his oatmeal-raisin cookie.

He describes the day he was given his assignment as the "worst day of [his] life." He and all the rest of the enlistees were standing outside, waiting for their names to be called. Most were coming out with an assignment to food service. My grandpa, watching their crestfallen faces, started praying: "Anything but food service, anything but food service." His prayers didn't work

#12

so well—he too was assigned to food service. “Oh, I was devastated,” he says, an old-wound expression on his face. “I was on the phone with my brother, just bawling.” I tried to imagine giving up my education, family, and a brand new car to have an adventure, only to land in a job I know I’m overqualified for, one I know I’m going to be in for years—so much for heroism. “The only thing I knew how to make was oatmeal!” he said to me, laughing.

He continued to describe how he hated cooking, but got really good at cleaning pans. “Going to war on them,” I joked. He described to me how the four years seemed long, but at the end of them, it seemed to have flown by “a little like high school.” He told me how he learned to stand up for himself and to like numbers (he later would raise my mother and her siblings on an accounting career). Grasping for a moral out of all of this, I decided that even if something seems terrible at the beginning, it won’t be so bad in the end.

My grandpa set to work contradicting this, however, when he told me about finally being sent to Vietnam. He visited the villages there a few times, but the conditions the people lived in, he said, were too much for him. He couldn’t handle it more than a few times. As he said this, he shook his head, and then was silent for a moment. I took more of his cookie.

Slowly, he said, “When the movie *Good Morning, Vietnam* came out, I went to see it at the theatre.” He tells me that Vietnam’s landscape in the movie was beautiful, “all green and blue and yellow,” but that he had forgotten that that’s how the land had really looked. In his memory, everything was brown and dark, depressing as the conditions the Vietnamese suffered. He remembers crying in the theater, and for a man that is very averse to vulnerability, this was a big thing. He hadn’t thought about Vietnam in years, and suddenly the juxtaposition of the physical truth—yellow, green, blue—and the psychological truth—damp brown—was overpowering.