

ard T. Nuske Memorial Scholarship

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During 1968, the number of U.S. troops wounded in the Vietnam War was 16,899 according to U.S. government archives (*Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics*). One of those wounded troops was my grandfather, David Frie, age 19.

On Wednesday, June 28, 1967, my grandfather was sworn in as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps during a Minnesota Twins baseball game. After the 4th inning of the game, about 150 men, mostly 17 to 19-year-olds, lined up on the baselines to take their oath of enlistment. Immediately afterwards, they boarded a bus for the airport and flew to Camp Pendleton, California, to start their military training. The group was later known as "The Twins Platoon" ("Twins Platoons: Twin Platoons Generations Apart").

He was trained in artillery and assigned to duty in Vietnam. His assignment was with the 1st Marine Division, 2nd Battalion, 11th Marine Regiment, Echo Battery. He fought in the Vietnam War from January to May 1968, operating the light, towable 105mm Howitzer in support of ground operations. His artillery unit was small, agile, mobile, and moved frequently, as needed. On May 11, 1968, my grandfather's last day in Vietnam, he was hit with incoming mortar rounds and became a casualty.

As his granddaughter with a strong interest in the medical field as my future career, I paid extra attention to my grandfather's storytelling, specifically when he relayed his experiences of survival after being wounded-in-action. I was curious about his injuries, the actions of the corpsmen, and the outcomes of treatment and rehabilitation. Beyond medical care, I was also interested in what got him through it all. What kept him going?

Here is some of what my grandfather shared with me. On the night of May 11, 1968, his unit was attacked. He was hit by indirect fire in a field location near the village of Phu Loc. The

Koss, 1

blast sent shrapnel flying and my grandfather was hit multiple times. He was immobilized, most likely in a state of shock. His flak jacket and helmet kept him alive, but his extremities were covered in wounds. In the midst of the noise and chaos, a Navy corpsman got to him, administered first aid, dragged him into a foxhole, and gave him morphine. He made sure my grandfather was safe and comfortable before moving on to assess more wounded soldiers. When danger subsided, my grandfather was brought to a bunker where he was given more first aid and put on a medevac helicopter.

My grandfather was dropped off at a semi-mobile evacuation hospital near Phu Bai. Here, he was cut open and the shrapnel cleaned out (or as much as could be removed). The wounds were cleaned and left open, but wrapped for the next transportation. He was then flown to Yokosuka, Japan, and then by Helicopter to Camp Drake, Osaka, Japan, for stabilization at the U.S. Army Hospital. Due to the nature of his injuries, he was further evacuated to the U.S. Naval Hospital in Great Lakes, Illinois, arriving on May 24th, where he spent the next 6 months recovering.

As a Marine in recovery at Great Lakes Naval Hospital, each patient floor seemed like one giant room, filled with hundreds of beds of soldiers, in various stages of recovery from a multitude of wounds and illnesses. This 1960, 12-story building with 825 beds, was the main receiving hospital for sailors and Marines injured in the Vietnam War (*National Library of Medicine; Evaluation of the Lovell Federal Health Care Center Merger: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations*). In hindsight, my grandfather recognized one of the benefits of living together in this huge room – camaraderie with fellow soldiers. One always recognized someone else worse off than yourself, conversation flowed, and distractions were continuous.

Part of my grandfather's medical recovery during his 6 months in Great Lakes Naval Hospital involved employment. He was assigned limited-duty as a bandage-packer, later a chaplain's assistant, and still later, a baker's assistant. These part-time duties reaped the benefits

#1

physical exercise, socialization, and the satisfaction of being productive. All this, while his body was healing. As months passed, he was granted weekend passes to leave the hospital grounds. Sometimes he hitch-hiked or took a bus, back to his childhood home in Minnesota. Other times, a friend visited with him, or events were planned by the hospital. All-in-all, these activities lifted one's spirits and kept patients engaged.

This healthcare information shared by my grandfather interested me a lot, as it helped me better understand how I might best serve a patient under my care in the future – that caregiving was more than just healing the wound, it was also about lifting one's spirit.

Pressing on, I inquired of him again, on who may have helped save his life? He immediately responded by giving credit to the Navy corpsman, who did his job with military efficiency and proficiency, in saving his life. He offered no further details, but he was very grateful! My grandfather never knew the name of this life-saving corpsman, but he never, ever will forget him. I'm glad my grandfather was sharing his Vietnam battlefield story, so I could learn from this soldier's experience, and maybe someday I'll be a healthcare hero to another who is in need.

In reflection, on his medical-care experiences during the Vietnam War, my grandfather readily offered that he felt the U.S. military had perfected its skills with regard to getting the Vietnam combat troops speedily and safely out of the battlefield and into fast, efficient, professional medical care, and help toward their recovery. I was amazed by the amount of healthcare professionals who worked together in a carefully coordinated effort to help my grandfather survive, recover, and make it home safely.

As I listened to my grandfather tell his story, I felt I was learning how extremely scary and stressful this young combat soldier may have been under war conditions, and how making a patient feel safe and comfortable is a very big part of the recovery process in health care.

I also wanted to learn how even very small gestures could make an impact on a soldier's life, returning with injuries from a combat zone. Although he could not remember a specific "Florence Nightingale" person who crossed his path on his road to recovery, my grandfather did have positive memories of Red Cross workers and volunteers, who helped him get in touch with loved ones, and offered support along his path toward recovery. For him and so many wounded soldiers, this was an essential part of recovery, both physically and mentally, the need to be connected with family and having a support system as part of the recovery process.

I was struck by his mention of the Red Cross organization, since I am currently being trained as a Certified Nursing Assistant by the Red Cross, and last year completed the Red Cross Lifeguard training and certification course for my summer job as a lifeguard. I never realized how closely this organization worked with the military during the Vietnam War and how vitally important it was to the soldiers who needed help beyond healthcare. I feel proud to be affiliated with the Red Cross, knowing I am but a small part of this huge organization, through its impactful part of my grandfather's recovery. My grandfather felt the Red Cross acted like an army of social workers, dedicated to the help and support of U.S. soldiers, giving them a more human experience in a very dehumanizing atmosphere.

What have I learned along the way? I have a clearer meaning of his Vietnam War soldier experience. And, I have a better understanding of what a veteran is. Watching him as an honor guard/color guard member of his local American Legion Post, serving his community members at funerals, burial sites, and marching in parades, is very heartwarming. It makes me proud, and it "does me proud" to know I am a part of it through family. The word "compassion" rings clearly throughout this story, and is continuing on through my better understanding of his life, both as a witness to his life today, and as a student, learning from his story. I will strive to be compassionate with my patients, as I offer my nursing skills in their healthcare.

#1

After having focused on his survival from war, he appreciated that the military shared his goal of getting back to life and being a productive member of society. My grandfather came home to use his educational benefits offered through this military service. He married his high-school sweetheart, raised seven children, and today has 17 grandchildren. He provided for his family as a retail owner/manager of furniture stores. Now retired, he continues to be an active member of his community, with both civic service and a faith life. In May 2022, my grandfather received the honor of an invitation to participate in Freedom Honor Flight, with a flight leaving from La Crosse, Wisconsin, and spending a full day in Washington D.C., viewing and learning about the military monuments and memorials at our nation's Capitol.

Today, as a senior in high school, the oldest child of the oldest daughter of my grandfather, and as the eldest of my grandparents' 17 grandchildren, I feel braver in setting my goals and more determined in meeting them. I am so happy to have listened to my grandfather's Vietnam War story, and have him listen to me ask questions of him, and fully realize the freedom I have is a beautiful privilege to behold. And within that privilege, my goal is to become a healthcare worker, who compassionately serves wherever I am needed.

Committee on Evaluation of the Lovell Federal Health Care Center Merger, et al.
Evaluation of the Lovell Federal Health Care Center Merger: Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations. National Academies Press (US), 28 December 2012.
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