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Vietnam Veterans of America Scholarship

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Shots rang out across the triple canopy jungle. Vietnam, 1968, was not a safe place to be. Artillery shells rained down, and the word "incoming" was far too common and far too deadly. My Grandpa, or Opa as we call him, was in the midst of it. "I don't know how I survived," were his words when discussing his two tours in Vietnam. "I was lucky." Times in the Army for Opa were not always this dangerous. He served 27 years enlisting right out of high school in 1955. He says most of those years were the best of his life. Opa was constantly moving, as he was stationed all over the place. He served different jobs in the military many of which he was not properly trained for. If you ask him today I'm sure he will tell you, "I had a lot of fun."

The story of Opa's military service cannot be told in just a few pages because he encountered countless adventures. I will give you a taste of his Army life. At age 18, Opa went to boot camp, medical training, and then was shipped to Landstuhl, Germany. He drove a "Cracker box" and transferred bodies from the hospital to the morgue. "Nobody wanted to do the job, but somebody had to," he told me. Opa was a good soldier, keeping things in tip top shape. He was awarded "soldier of the month", more often than anyone in the unit. The commander told the other men to "act more like Kallio". He loved his time in the Army, and he lived to please others. The first three years were easy, including working with the ski medical patrol on the slopes for temporary duty. Opa considered it being paid to ski. In 1958, just months before the end of his first tour, Opa was called to Lebanon on orders. For three months he worked as a medic. It was the first time he was fired at. "The bullet hole came right through the center of the red cross on the ambulance," he explained.

His tour ended, and Opa came back to the states. He could not find a job, and joined the Army once again. He requested to go back to Germany. After a short stay at Ft. Meade, Maryland, he was headed back to Germany. He served in Wurzburg and Darmstadt. In Germany, he met my Oma. "By far the best thing that ever happened to me; I am so lucky to have her."

After 3 years of med helicopter support in Germany, and the birth of my dad, Opa was transferred to Alaska. Opa served in Alaska from 1962 to 1968. By luck, he worked at a job no one would expect of an Army soldier. He was one of the trainers to the U.S. Olympic Biathlon team and traveled with them for six years. However, the conflict in Vietnam was heating up, and in 1968, Opa was on his way to Vietnam. Another son was born and it was hard to be pulled away from his family. "In the airport I went down one tunnel, and they went down the other, and through the glass windows was the last time I would see them before I got home." Oma, my dad and my uncle, (ages 8 and 6) went back to Germany to live with my great grandma while Opa was away.

In talking about the war, Opa became reserved and vague. I knew that the Vietnam times were tough, but it was not until this interview that I realized what a war like that can do to you. "There are things I wish I could forget, but can't," was the first thing Opa said. That summed up his mood on the war. He was stationed near Hue Phubai in the north near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and the site was incredibly active. As a medic, his duties involved trekking through the jungle with his med station on his back that weighed somewhere between 70 and 100 pounds. He dealt with injuries he was not trained for. The most incredible story



was one where he had to remove a live light anti-tank warhead from the leg of a soldier. The doctors were not available. Opa took the warhead out, put it at his feet, and went on to treat the man. It was for this that he received his Soldier's Medal.

Opa taught me about the uncertainty that went with the Vietnam War. The troops would pass through villages, and even mingle with the people. Opa knew some of Vietnamese language, and in one village he met a young boy. A friendship struck up. "I gave him small gifts like a U.S. government pen, and he would give us some good food." When the troops left the village on their way to Tan Son Nhui, they were attacked. After the skirmish, the body of the boy was found with the pen and dog tags taken from an American soldier. The boy had been fighting for the Vietcong. "It was nearly impossible to tell if someone was Vietcong." Upon arriving at Tan Son Nhui Air Base, Opa was promoted, and he was given his own medical aid station.

When responding to what Vietnam was like, this was his answer, "mostly jungle, and then the rains came and it was nearly impossible to stay dry." He said the worst thing was the friendly fire. The U.S. bombing raids came far too close for comfort. "I don't like calling it friendly fire because it was not friendly at all." People were constantly on edge. Opa treated people's wounds and gave away many purple hearts. "I could have given myself a purple heart on numerous occasions. I was constantly cut up." He would not talk in depth about the people he was fighting with. My guess is that it is too difficult for him to recall some of the friends he lost; some of the things he saw. He told me a story about a jungle patrol where the artillery was striking everywhere and there were countless casualties. He said that there was a direct

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hit on a medic he was working with. The medic was killed. "There were parts of his body everywhere and..." After saying this he paused for a long time, and said, "there is not a good way to sensor that part." The first tour in Vietnam was the worst. His second involved less action, and he worked in a Vietnamese hospital.

I asked Opa how he felt about his service overall. He smiled and said, "looking back I had a great time." He was happy in the Army, outside of his duty in Vietnam. "I learned a lot about myself, about life, and about the pursuit of happiness in Vietnam. Not that Vietnam was a very happy place." I asked him if his service had affected his life today, and he said that it affected him more than he would like. Opa is being treated for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the VA hospital. Having done a research paper on PTSD last year, I understand just how bad it can be. There are traumatic events that Opa would like nothing more than to forget. I could tell by the way the interview went he was holding in those events. I did not think it was my place to pry them out.

I learned an incredible amount of information from the interview. Opa is an interesting man with life experiences that most people will never have. I gained insight to the life of a soldier serving in Vietnam. The war was tough on many people. Surviving was based on luck. It was more of a fight to survive the tour of duty than a fight to accomplish any victory. Opa was a good man and a good soldier. He did what he was told, and even went above his duty at times. I see now that there are things you learn about yourself during times of war that cannot happen anywhere else. Opa would always bring up my Oma during the interview saying how much he wanted to see her when they were apart, and how she was the best thing that

happened to him. I think the war taught him to not take things for granted, and to appreciate what you have. From what I learned, the military, and especially the battlefield is a different world. New things come into play, and your priorities become very clear to you when you are fighting for your life. The interview gave me a greater respect for the men and women in the military. The things our soldiers go through for our country are hard to believe.

Opa taught me that being in the military does not always mean being in the fray of the battle. His stories of his duties in places like Alaska, Germany, Lebanon, and Maryland makes the Army look like a grand adventure. He was a trainer for an Olympic Biathlon team, a medic on the ski slopes, and he served duty on medical helicopters. If it were not for the Army, he would not have met my Oma, and I would not be here. Opa feels great about serving his country. The people you meet in the Army, and the experiences you have remain with you for the rest of your life. I can see that he is proud of himself, whether he likes to admit it or not.

Until this interview I did not know that Opa was being treated for PTSD. I know that it is common among those who fought in Vietnam, but I did not realize it was this close to home. After hearing about the things he saw, I can understand why he would want to forget those memories. "Life was and still is great, when I am not thinking about the bad," he said.

In 1994, Opa and Oma moved from Nurnberg, Germany to Wisconsin. I was two years old. They live across the street from me. I love having Opa around. My Oma's German cooking makes things pretty great, but that's another story. Opa and all Vietnam veterans are heroes for going through what they did on behalf of our country. I am glad I was able to learn so much from him. I am proud of my Opa.