

A Medic's Journey

The young man heard the pilot's voice, cracking with static, above the noise of the plane's engines. "The runway is being shelled. When the plane lands, the doors will open. Run to the closest foxhole and take cover," the pilot commanded. The man felt the plane swaying as the rockets flew by. The tension in the air tingled his every nerve as he and his fellow soldiers waited for the doors to open. A wall of unbearable heat hit them as they exited the shuddering plane. The smell of damp soil, rotting vegetation, diesel exhaust, pungent explosives, and decomposing flesh overwhelmed him producing an olfactory cocktail that would be ingrained in his memory forever. This young soldier's name was Michael Weaver and he was an Army medic reporting for duty in Vietnam.

Leaving college when he was nineteen and then being drafted into the Army, Private Weaver felt strongly that it was his duty to serve his country. While becoming an Army Medic was not his first career choice, he took on the role with pride and eagerness. He successfully completed Basic Training and the intensive medical training required of all military medics. By the time he left for Vietnam, Specialist Weaver was a competent and confident young soldier who was ready to serve his fellow man in any way needed. Filled with optimism and a strong sense of purpose, he boarded the plane headed for Saigon.

His experience in Vietnam was full of anticipation, as it gave him the opportunity to experience medical challenges that he could find nowhere else. He provided medical care for injured US soldiers, fallen US soldiers and North Vietnamese Prisoners of War. Helping other

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people through unimaginably traumatic experiences, he made a difference in their lives and that was enough for Specialist Weaver.

As time went on, however, the realities of a horrific, divisive and unpopular war began to take its toll on Specialist Weaver. He struggled to understand the purpose of the war and could not reconcile the huge destruction of life with a severe lack of purpose. Clinging to his dedication to duty and his commitment to helping other people, he worked diligently through difficult days with quiet strength and empathy, while searching for an answer that would not come easily.

That answer emerged slowly over the course of Specialist Weaver's life and is still evolving. His Vietnam story is compelling and contains life lessons that we all can learn from.

The First Lesson Learned: War doesn't destroy true virtue. Every month, the medics in Specialist Weaver's unit would travel off base and into the villages to provide medical assistance to the natives of Vietnam who were in great need. While on one of these excursions, Specialist Weaver encountered a little girl who had extensive head wounds. A putrid smell came from the little girl's head and maggots covered the entire injury area. Gently removing each individual maggot and cleaning the infected wound took Specialist Weaver over two hours of dedicated work to complete. Specialist Weaver proved that humility, patience, and unconditional love survive no matter what the circumstance. In fact, these virtues may even flourish if given the freedom to do so.

The Second Lesson Learned: Dignity cannot be destroyed, except by choice. Upon returning home, Specialist Weaver, as well as every soldier, was not well received. The hostility and rejection that these soldiers experienced when they returned home caused some to take

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off their uniforms so they would not be insulted while traveling home. Even as a medic who saved lives in Vietnam, Specialist Weaver was exposed to this rejection. But, loyal to his country and to those he served, Specialist Weaver kept his uniform on. He was proud of the lives he had saved and the service he had given to his country. He stood tall and did not allow the protesters to take away his sense of dignity. He proved that pride, loyalty and integrity are the weapons of choice when battling adversity.

The Third Lesson Learned: Causing hurt is not required to effectively make a point. Vietnam War protesters infiltrated every street and every government area during the war and after the war they treated the returning soldiers cruelly. Today, protesters of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan hold signs and chant outside of military funerals. To veterans, this is the worst disrespect that can be given to any military family. To counter this dishonor, a group of Vietnam Veterans, called The Patriot Guard, bear American flags and silently stand with the family of the deceased soldier. They refuse to aggressively attack the protesters and focus on protecting the families and honoring the fallen soldier. Most importantly, they refuse to allow another soldier to shoulder the cruel insults they did. Mr. Weaver is a highly respected member of this group and has participated in a total of 37 military funerals. Thirty-seven times a clear point has been made with non-violent dignity and a soldier and his, or her, family has been protected.

The Fourth Lesson Learned: Bad experiences happen, but they can create new opportunities. Mr. Weaver is an inspiration for this lesson. Even though this man faced extreme horrors in Vietnam, he decided to take these traumatic experiences and turn them into good. Mr. Weaver leads a humble and service oriented life that includes volunteer work

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with several organizations. He stands with the Patriot Guard at military funerals, is President of the local Vietnam Veterans Association, works with the state level Vietnam Veterans Association, volunteers with a local Hospice agency, and takes the time to talk with youth in the community about what he experienced in Vietnam. His sincere concern for others shows in everything he does and every word he speaks. He has purposely used the difficult experience of Vietnam to help him create the life of service he wished to live.

The Fifth Lesson Learned: Vietnam Veterans share an unbreakable emotional bond and are connected in surprising ways. Mr. Weaver knew the entire story of my uncle, Gene DeBruin, who was shot down over Vientiane, Laos, on September 5, 1963, while dropping rations to Hmong refugees. Despite the fact that Gene was a confirmed MIA/POW, his fate is still unknown. Unbeknownst to the DeBruin family, Mr. Weaver took it upon himself to learn about Gene with the intention of providing support and comfort to the DeBruin family. During our interview, Mr. Weaver expressed his sincere appreciation to Gene for helping the Hmong people who fought so valiantly against the North Vietnamese. He also shared his sadness that Gene's fate had never been resolved and assured the DeBruin family that they are – and always will be - in the thoughts and prayers of the local Vietnam Veterans.

The stories of men like Mr. Weaver and Gene DeBruin must not be forgotten. Every veteran has a story and it takes tremendous strength of character for Vietnam Veterans to share their wartime experiences with others. These stories must be told to preserve the memory and to teach younger generations about the sacrifice made by the men and women of the Vietnam War. These stories must be shared so that everyone can learn about the morals, values, and life lessons they offer. This scholarship project makes preservation of these

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precious stories and the legacies of these brave men and women possible. Participation in this project has been a humbling experience and a high honor that will always be remembered, just as our Vietnam Veterans will always be remembered. They deserve nothing less.

Respectfully submitted,

Laura Hein, Xavier High School Senior
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