

MADISON MATHAUS

(H2)

Robert Vincent Swanson, a hero, a survivor, my grandpa, papa as we call him. He was the youngest son of Axel and Astrid, born in Massachusetts to Swedish immigrant parents who came to the United States for a better life and opportunities. As a toddler, he fell through the ice, almost drowning but was rescued by his older brother, who saw him fall through while playing hockey on the pond. Shortly after, the family moved to Wisconsin and started their new life. This new, happy life was cut short when his father tragically passed away when Robert was nine years old.

As a young boy, my papa realized the importance of hard work, family, and doing whatever it took to survive. As a first-generation American, he knew life might not be easy, but he would work hard to survive and make the best life for his family. He started working odd jobs at the age of eleven to support his mom as her health began to fail at an early age. Her autoimmune disease, rheumatoid arthritis, would slowly limit her mobility, ravage her joints, and make her hands almost unusable. Even as my papa started his own family, he continued checking on her daily, taking her to doctor appointments, and ensuring she was always taken care of.

Astrid was a kind, quiet, humble soul who loved both of her sons with all her heart. When her oldest son, Karl, joined the Navy, she was proud of him; however, nothing would prepare her for the day an officer knocked on her front door. Karl had suffered an injury that left him unresponsive in a coma at Walter Reed Hospital. She would leave her youngest high school son at home and rush to the side of her eldest as he struggled to survive. He would survive and be honorably discharged from the Navy. However, his recovery would be long, and his disabilities would be permanent after having a metal plate inserted into his head.

After high school, my papa registered for the draft as the war in Vietnam began. In 1967, Astrid submitted an exemption as Robert was the primary source of income for the family and

},

#2

was caring for his ailing mom and recovering older brother. He was granted a one-year exemption from the draft, but as the expiration date neared, he volunteered for the draft. He saw many of his friends leaving for Vietnam and felt his duty to serve his country. Volunteering for the draft meant he would move to the top of the list and would all but guarantee that he would go to Vietnam after basic training.

In October 1966, he started basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and was stationed in Fort Lewis in Washington after basic training. A poignant phase of the Vietnam War occurred in late January 1968, the Tet Offensive, the same period my papa arrived in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive became the largest military operation by either side until that point in the Vietnam War. He arrived at the United States Army base in Long Binh as part of the 1st Infantry Division, known as "The Big Red One." Bien Hoa, north of Saigon, would be his post for the next 11 months. My papa rose to the rank of 5<sup>th</sup> class specialist.

Divisions within "The Big Red One" took part in Operation Quyet Thang ('Resolve to Win') and Operation Toan Thang ('Certain Victory'). In September 1968, Major General Keith L. Ware, several of his command staff, and the helicopter crew were killed in action after their plane was shot down by enemy fire. Major General Ware was the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. In 1968, the soldiers of "The Big Red One" were on the front lines of the war while anti-war tensions and protests rose at home.

The jungles of Vietnam were dense, difficult to navigate, and perfect cover for the enemy. My papa remembers the sound of the crop dusters overhead as Agent Orange rained down over the troops to clear the jungle foliage. The toxic chemical cocktail, characterized by the orange-striped 55-gallon drum, was inhaled and ingested by soldiers. At the time, he and his fellow soldiers did not realize Agent Orange would become a permanent fixture in their lives. He

#2

and his friends have lasting health problems ranging from prostate cancer, blood cancers, other cancers, and severe heart disease. My papa suffered a near-fatal heart blockage, of 99%, at 59 years of age with no prior history of high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Decades later, the physical conditions and ailments of Agent Orange are slowly robbing my papa and his friends of their health and lives.

In November 1968, his time in the Army ended as he flew to Oakland, California, then home to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He came home with little more than the Army dress uniform on his back and his military paperwork in hand. The dress uniform hung dutifully in his closet since his return from Vietnam. He recently showed me the uniform containing his Vietnam Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, and his 5<sup>th</sup> class specialist insignia. Something long forgotten sat in the inner breast pocket of the uniform, his 1968 plane ticket home to see his mom. He shared that the Army had asked him to re-enlist, offering him a sizable pay increase that would benefit his ailing mom. He was his mom's primary source of income and had sent nearly all his military pay back home to her. He contemplated re-enlisting; however, her health was failing, and he needed to ensure she was taken care of. That plane ticket represented the duty he served to his country and the duty he served to his family, as he was one of the fortunate ones to make it back home to his family.

My papa rarely shares specifics about his time in Vietnam, as I am sure he experienced and saw things that can never be erased. Those close to him know he served in Vietnam but realize it is not something he discusses regularly. Every now and then, usually around the beginning of November, he brings out an old, black leather briefcase that contains remnants of his time in the war. The briefcase contains promotion paperwork, a basic training yearbook, military discharge paperwork, dog tags, and some military honor medals. Most Americans

3.

#2

recognize November 11<sup>th</sup> as Veteran's Day, a day to remember and thank all who have served, especially those veterans still living among us. This is also my papa's birthday, so for me, it is a day to recognize him as a veteran, a hero, a survivor, and my papa.