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## Stories of the Past

By Rebecca Fox

I have never before had an opportunity to truly pick my grandfather's brain about his experiences in the army. Due to the distance between us (I live in Wisconsin and he in Alabama) I usually get to see him only twice a year. This hardly creates much opportunity for in-depth story telling. I have always believed that a person is defined by their past experiences, that the things we have gone through in our lives change and shape us. Since I have not been able to hear about much of my grandfather's life, he has been quite a mystery to me. He has seen so much change in America throughout his lifetime. I was always sure that there must be a great deal to his story. The chance to find out more about this man who I love so much, but know relatively little about, was too intriguing to pass up.

I had known that my grandfather held the rank of Colonel in the United States Army and had worked in some form of research, but I didn't know the specifics. When he opened the interview with the information that he had taught chemistry at West Point, conducted tear gas research at the Pentagon, and interrogated prisoners about enemy equipment in Korea, I was completely shocked. I realized that there was so much about my granddad that I had no idea about. I suppose that no one imagines their grandfather as someone important, though perhaps I am easily impressed.

One of the most important things about my grandfather is his sense of honor and duty. Throughout our interview, I was struck with just how different his recounting of the Vietnam War was from that of my history book. My granddad was a career army man. More than anything, he is proud that he did as he was ordered to the best of his ability. His descriptions of

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his experiences are, therefore, emotionally disconnected compared to those of someone who was drafted. This aspect of my grandfather's story gave me a very different view of the War than my ex-hippie American Studies teacher. In fact, when I asked about his opinion of the politics of the time, my granddad simply said that "it is not the army's job to have an opinion about politics but instead to follow the orders of its civilian bosses". This comment best sums up his outlook during his time in service of his country: straightforward and dutiful.

The story about my granddad's experiences in the Vietnam War starts in 1969. Lieutenant Colonel William Fox was due to be promoted when he was given the choice of returning to Korea for a very prestigious position or of going to Vietnam as the commander of an experimental team. After discussing the pros and cons with his wife and praying fervently, he eventually decided to go to Saigon. For the past twenty five years he had been working in the Chemical Corps. Now he would be taking on a very new role in a similar field. He was given command of a new group called BDART (Battle Damage Assessment and Reporting Team). His unit of 49 officers and men would have the job of collecting data on the United States' damaged equipment and wounded men after battles and send the information to be interpreted in Aberdeen, Maryland. His men were separated into three teams scattered throughout Vietnam and he would split his time traveling between them and the base in Saigon. As his understanding of the significance of his work grew, so did his enthusiasm. He stated that he was most proud that the data gathered by the technical experts, surgeons, and pathologists on his team resulted in the upgrading of helmets and protective vests; he knew that his unit's work was saving the lives of the troops.

This barrage of information stunned me. I had had no idea that this sort of in-field forensic research was not a long-standing practice. I was even more amazed that my own

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grandfather had taken a large part in its establishment. My imagination flew to images of a battle field after the slaughter, with shrapnel from mines littering the ground and damaged tanks standing abandoned and desolate. Then the thought suddenly struck me: how many gruesomely destroyed bodies had he and others studied? When I voiced this concern, he quickly assured me that he had not been present during the actual autopsies. Despite this, I still wondered how many photographs of wounds he had had to see.

The question about autopsies, though, brought to mind a story which my grandfather had not told me before. While he himself had not had to directly deal with mangled remains of US soldiers, the mortuary photographer under my grandfather's command certainly did. Unfortunately, this poor man was not specially trained to deal with death on that scale like the pathologists and soon the stress began to eat at his mental health. The photographer took to drinking heavily and my grandfather became concerned for him. Thankfully, he was able to have the man transferred out to the field. From then on, the job of mortuary photographer was rotated among several men. Through this story I was reminded that while my grandfather talked of his experiences very frankly and factually, these circumstances were very emotionally strenuous.

This is not to say that my grandfather did not go through personal emotional hardship himself. While he always has a very straightforward and objective tone when describing his life, one of his stories in particular gave me a small insight into his heart.

There was a man named Roy Crouch who had been friends with my granddad for several years. They had worked together in Germany, taught together at West Point, and attended church together. Once, when my grandfather was supposed to spend the weekend with Roy, he

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received the news that there had been an accident. Roy had been cut in half by the helicopter blades. When my granddad asked if he needed to identify the body, he was told that there wasn't even enough of his dear friend's body left to identify. I can only imagine the shock and pain of his loss. While I know that during war accidents like these are inevitable, I am sure that it was not as easy then for my granddad to talk about as it is now.

One thing that I really wanted to know about, though, was what it was like to be away from his family for a whole year. While he was able to return home twice in order to report to his superiors in the States, I couldn't help but wonder what it was like to be a part from his wife and three sons. After all, the youngest is my dad. I was told that my grandmother wrote to him every day and that my granddad sent pictures and recordings on tapes back to her and the boys. Although my grandfather was rather calm and dismissive about the whole affair (as is his nature), I still wondered just how hard the separation had been.

As our talk went on, my admiration and respect for my grandfather grew. There was so much I had never heard about, so much that I didn't understand. His descriptions of Vietnam now help me to see him in a new light. Although I had known that he had a wonderfully old-fashioned sense of honor, I now see just to what extent that is true. When I asked him what he was most proud of, his answer was that he had done what he was ordered to do and had helped save lives while doing it. While he never witnessed any actual fighting, I know that he still carries with him the images of the aftermath of those battles. This small picture into his past has helped me better understand him and has deepened my respect for him considerably. I am proud to carry his blood in me and I hope that I will be able follow his example of honorable conduct and to share his legacy of integrity.