

31

More personal  
examples

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"Although both popular imagination and academic research on the Vietnam War continue to flourish, there is no consensus in sight. Only the U.S. Civil War rivals the power of the Vietnam War to divide and inflame generations upon generations of Americans."

Andreas W. Daum

This quote from Andreas Daum ("*Vietnam War Quotes*") seems to encompass many of the conflicting opinions I read while researching the Vietnam War. The United States was divided between people who felt it was important to stop the spread of Communism in Indochina, and people who marched to end the war and bring the soldiers home. During the official Vietnam era from August 5, 1964, to May 7, 1975, there were 9,087,000 U.S. military personnel serving on active duty; of those, 2,709,918 Americans served in Vietnam ("*Vietnam War Facts, Stats and Myths*"). I would like to tell the story of one of the nine million active duty personnel, my grandfather, Tom Brown.

Leland Thomson (Tom) Brown was born in Indianapolis, Indiana in December of 1947. He grew up in Muncie, Indiana with his parents, three sisters, and one brother. Tom's father, Leland, was a veteran of World War II, serving alongside Tom's uncle as surgeons who helped to care for the wounded from major battles in Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In his family, my grandfather said, "If you got the call, you went." So, at age 19, in Indianapolis, Indiana, Tom enlisted in the Air Force.

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From August 17, 1967, until November 3, 1967, Tom was stationed at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, for basic military training. He was part of the 3711BMTS. While there he spent time polishing boots, firing M16s, and pulling guard duty at parade rest for two-hour shifts.

Once he completed basic military training, Tom was stationed in Grand Forks, North Dakota from November 1967 through April 1969. During his time at Grand Forks, Tom initially worked as a telephone operator. After about six months, he received clearance to work as a teletype operator. Besides working sixty hours a week, Tom met his future wife, *Mary Jean*, who was introduced to him by his roommate. In his spare time, he would go on double dates, all cramming into my grandpa's friend's Fiat Spider, to go on outings to the local park.

After Tom's training at Grand Forks came to an end, he was given a month leave to spend with family in Muncie, Indiana before leaving for Korea on Memorial Day, May 30, 1969. Upon arriving in Korea, Tom worked as a teletype operator in a special communications center where they supported pilots and mechanics from Japan. Life, stationed in Korea was anything but easy. Soldiers would report no later than 7:00 am and would finish the arduous day at 7:00 pm, leading to workweeks of around sixty hours. The climate was also less than favorable. My grandfather described it as being like the cold, bone-chilling weather of Wisconsin, but more damp. Because of this, his one request for Christmas was an electric blanket.

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During his spare time in Korea, Tom read many books, played golf, and ate a lot of ramen noodles. He also visited the Korean countryside on his bike. Initially, the less technologically advanced Korean agricultural methods and the bustling markets selling trinkets was a cultural shock. On the rare occasion that it was permitted, perhaps three or four times a year, Tom was able to make phone calls home to his parents and to Mary, whom he was dating at the time.

Tom finished his time in Korea in June, 1970, and was then stationed at Hill Air Force Base in Utah. At Hill Air Force Base, Tom worked as a teletype operator. He had a specific shift that he worked while he was there. For recreation, Tom played cards, basketball, and golf. It was at Hill AFB that Tom ended his active duty military career on February 18, 1971.

My grandfather mentioned that it was not always an easy return to civilian life after active duty. He said that his friends advised him not to wear his uniform aboard the plane when flying back home to Muncie, Indiana. Even in civilian clothes, his short military haircut courted rude stares and ugly comments. One of the things Tom was most looking forward to about civilian life was being released from the hierarchy of the military. However, once employed at Montgomery Ward, he found that hierarchy also exists outside of the military, and management wasn't always friendly toward returning veterans.

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Tom went on to marry his Grand Forks sweetheart, Mary Jean, on August 21, 1971. They eventually settled in Mattawan, Michigan where they raised three boys: Matt (my father), Luke, and Aaron. Tom owned a small-town hardware store in Mattawan for 31 years. He said he tried to bring some of the structure and discipline he learned from the military to his young high school employees. He tried to help them learn as much as they could because a hardware store was a great place to learn life skills. I think my grandfather is excited that I am learning some of those same skills in my job at Ace Hardware.

Tom has not had the opportunity to visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. He said he thinks it might be too painful to see the names of some of his friends displayed there. I had the opportunity to visit The Wall in eighth grade. It was a sobering sight to see panel after panel of the names of men who made the ultimate sacrifice. This week I will turn 18 years old, the same age as some of the men who were drafted to fight. It was a sobering statistic to learn that 11,465 soldiers who died in Vietnam were under the age of 20 ("*Vietnam War Facts, Stats and Myths*"). Fifty years ago, those boys who gave their lives would have been my relatives, classmates, and friends. I wonder what the men whose names are on The Wall would say to us today about conflict and peace? Would they warn us about the dangers of a divided society, especially considering the current COVID-19 pandemic? I hope I can learn to be more understanding and gracious when I meet with someone whose opinion is different than mine. I hope to make that a small tribute in remembrance of the many, like my grandfather, who served in the Vietnam War era.

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## Bibliography

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