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Vietnam Veterans of America Essay

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by Chad Helmke

It is hard to imagine that I am old enough to defend the United States and vote, but I am not old enough to purchase alcohol, cigarettes, vaping products, or a handgun. It is even more difficult to understand how my grandfathers felt about serving in the military. My grandfathers were both very private about their military experience. Perhaps I understood this quietness slightly better after traveling to Washington DC to see national monuments and witnessing the military honors at the burial of my maternal grandfather. This scholarship opportunity to interview a Vietnam veteran was an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about my paternal grandfather's experience serving in the Vietnam War. I was fortunate that my grandpa, Dennis Helmke, agreed to the interview.

Prior to the interview, I knew that Dennis Helmke was awarded two Purple hearts, participated in the Honor Flight, was involved in the Quilts of Valor program with my grandmother, and currently volunteers at the VA in Waukegan. Dennis's time in the Army was a mystery to not only me, but my parents as well. This scholarship was an opportunity to ask the questions that I was afraid to ask and learn more about when he served, his roles and responsibilities, and his location while in Vietnam.

In February of 1969, Dennis enlisted for Vietnam and left his pregnant wife in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Brigade/Artillery. The journey to Vietnam started with eight weeks in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He described this place as cold and damp due to its location near the mountains. The next stop was spending eight more weeks at Fort Sill, Oklahoma for more training. After 16 weeks of

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training, he went to Oakland, California to board a plane, with multiple connections and layovers, to take him to the Air Force base in Bien Hoa, Vietnam.

After a week or two, he was sent on a Bell H-1 helicopter, affectionately called a "Huey" or a "slick", to a Fire Support Base (FSB) in the Me Kong Delta. Two nights after his arrival, the Viet Cong attacked the base with 122 mm rockets. His job was to guard the Fire Direction Center (FDC). This was usually set up in the center of the base. Though he escaped injury that evening, from then on, his attitude and state-of-mind were completely altered. He became more vigilant, aware of his surroundings, and alert.

Dennis' son, Brian, was born on June 10, 1969. He received a message from his wife, Alberta, through the Red Cross a few hours later. This was a little surprising to me. Nevertheless, to stay in communication with his family, he wrote letters when he had time. Additionally, he used tapes and tape recorders to communicate with his wife. Exchanging tapes allowed him to experience Brian's early milestones while in Vietnam, and Brian was able to grow familiar with his dad's voice. He credited Brian recognizing him when he got home to their utilization of tape recordings.

Dennis' time in Vietnam was divided between III and IV Corps at many different bases. His tone changed slightly as he described a situation where President Nixon reported that no soldiers were outside of Vietnam when, in fact, the news was not correct. Dennis stated that he went as far as 22 miles into Cambodia. The statement made his comrades and him "feel betrayed and alone." During his 15 months of service, Dennis helped support the 1st, 9th, and 25th infantry along with the 9th Marines. His job was to drop shells in first and get possible dangers away. At the end of his service, he finished in the 23rd artillery as a Forward Observer.

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Dennis' bravery and efforts in battle were honored by receiving two Purple Hearts. He was uncertain about the specific dates of when he was wounded.

Nevertheless, he has a great deal of admiration for the helicopter pilot who helped him when he was shot while driving to do a mail delivery. He remembers the man's help during this traumatic situation, but unfortunately could not recall his name. The fog of war tends to do that to details. The second Purple Heart was received for shrapnel he took to his forehead from a mine. When asked how my grandmother and great-grandmother found out about his injuries, he said that his wife received the news from a military team of two, and his mother received a telegram.

For the last three weeks of his service, he stayed in a barrack in Bien Hoa dealing with a severe rash. When it was time to go and he had to give up his rifle, he stated that he "felt empty and scared." My grandpa shed some tears as he described going home. He described the plane as being silent during the take off. Dennis stated, "You could hear a pin drop." Even with two fighter planes in front and in back of the plane, the soldiers on board were scared and on edge. Perhaps they feared the worst could happen, or maybe it was the disbelief that they were finally going home and relieved of the responsibility to serve and protect the United States. Regardless, Dennis said the plane remained silent until the soldiers knew they were certain they were safe. When the coast of the United States appeared, they said, "We're going back to the world."

Dennis commented that he gained a great deal of respect for the Cambodians that helped the soldiers. The Cambodians showed generosity despite their struggles and shared their fresh fruit with the soldiers. It was evident that Dennis grew tired of sea

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rations and warm beer. Dennis' experiences post war still give him trouble. He immediately started dealing with some difficult PTSD episodes. This was the first time he admitted this to us. Helmke indicated that he has gotten better, but he still struggles with certain loud noises. The main things he credits for his transition from the military to civilian life include religion, his wife, and the rest of his family and close friends. Helmke volunteers at the VA and talks to other veterans about the importance of these things, rather than using drugs and alcohol, when coping with PTSD. He finds that other veterans usually struggle with trust issues and sensitivity. To help veterans like himself, he says it is very beneficial to talk to someone they trust.

In conclusion, this conversation with my grandpa helped me understand his time as a young man. He was a college student, husband, and expecting his first child when he left the comforts of his home to protect the United States. I gained valuable information and insight regarding his experiences in Vietnam and have a much deeper appreciation for what it means to be a veteran. It is a scary proposition, and I deeply appreciate the men and women who are called to serve and protect. My grandfather protected me from the graphic details of war. Nevertheless, seeing my grandpa struggle to talk about leaving Vietnam made it clear that the experience was difficult and challenging. I am hopeful that this interview helped my grandfather find trust and support with my family and me. Understanding the risks and sacrifices required to be a veteran takes on new meaning after this interview. It is my hope that, as we learn more about PTSD and trauma, our nation can provide the support and aid needed to overcome hardships and difficulties caused by their dedication and service.