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Richard T. Nuske Memorial Scholarship Essay

Christopher Nuske

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Dear VVA State Council,

My name is Christopher Nuske, and I am a Senior at Bay Port High School. I will be attending Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) in the Fall to pursue an Associate Degree in Architecture. I am also considering furthering my education beyond NWTC. My education is important to me, and I appreciate your consideration.

For this scholarship, I interviewed Dennis Watermolen, a family friend. My great grandmother, Virginia Nuske, introduced me to this scholarship named after my great grandfather, Richard T. Nuske. He was a career man in the Air Force from 1955 to 1975 and served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969. Unfortunately, my great grandfather could not tell me his story, as he passed away shortly after I was born. Dennis also served in the Air Force, but from 1967 to 1971. Before interviewing Dennis for this essay, I had not seen him for several years and knew nothing about his time in Vietnam. Most kids my age learn about the Vietnam War in school, but listening to his story took my knowledge, appreciation, and understanding to a whole new level.

Thank you for allowing me to share Dennis' story and offering this scholarship. I also want to thank Dennis for being so generous with his time, so that I could learn more about the Vietnam War.

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Dennis was born in Green Bay in 1948 and grew up in De Pere. He had three siblings and enjoyed working on vehicles, playing outside, and attending school. Dennis was nineteen and attending college when he volunteered to serve our country. A year and a half later, his brother was drafted into the Army. He and his brother received orders for Vietnam around the same time. However, families with multiple enlisted children could have only one child serve in Vietnam at a time. Dennis volunteered to go to Vietnam, whereas his brother went to Germany. Dennis chose the Air Force because he believed the lifestyle there was better than in the Army. During the Vietnam War, those in the Army had to endure the swampy, humid jungles where the hostile Viet Cong could easily hide. Besides that, the devastating effects of agent orange and napalm took a toll on troops. Though Dennis never dealt with such horror, he was still headed into unknown territory, unsure what was in store for him. Dennis had limited context about the history of Vietnam or the series of conflicts that resulted in the war. He heard about it in school but didn't fully comprehend what was happening there at the time.

Dennis underwent a physical in Milwaukee before being sent to basic training in San Antonio, Texas, where his journey truly began. Basic training, he said, was manageable if you obeyed every command. After basic training, Dennis enjoyed a thirty-day leave and chose to spend time with family, then headed to on-the-job training in Washington, DC. Exploring the east coast and learning its rich history provided much entertainment. Before deployment to Vietnam in 1969, Dennis saw his family one last time, during which he also started dating Mona, his future wife. Then, the journey to Vietnam began. He flew to Chicago, California, and finally arrived in Vietnam. I cannot imagine what it must have felt like to leave his family behind for something so unknown and the bravery it required.

^N Danang, his destination, suffered a series of attacks when he reached Vietnam, resulting in him commuting back in forth between cities before being sent to Tuy Hoa. Other than a runway, his base functioned as a rest and recuperation camp for the Army. Sometimes soldiers would come inside, exhausted from the unforgiving terrain and jungles. They were usually upset to see people like Dennis, who were paid the same but never experienced the dangers of combat in the nearby jungles. His first occupation was as a clerk typist for the security police squadron, and he eventually transferred to a position at the police headquarters. He also performed various maintenance duties on the runway and ground air operations. Those occupations kept Dennis away from harm to an extent. He sometimes saw mortar and rockets lobbed from afar whenever he left the base, especially in ^N Danang. He mentioned the rules of engagement were frustrating for him and his unit. He recalled one particular incident that left him furious; a fishing vessel was approaching despite multiple "warning" and "restricted" signs in several languages surrounding the base. They clearly stated that trespassers would be fired upon. The soldier on guard attempted to communicate with the ship, which had no response. He tried communicating with his superiors on what steps to take but didn't hear back from them. Having no idea what else to do, he brought it upon himself to sink the ship. Unfortunately, this resulted in the man being court marshaled, despite doing what he thought was right, given the situation. As such, Dennis came to feel war, in general, was being over-governed.

As difficult as it was to see the impact the war had on his fellow soldiers, it must have been even more difficult to watch what they went through from the safety of his base. He never dealt with the hazard of being exposed to agent orange, as many soldiers did. Seeing what members of different branches experienced made Dennis feel somewhat guilty, given many of

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their struggles with health conditions and other traumas in the years to come. Despite these negative experiences and feelings, something Dennis enjoyed was his week-long vacation. His choices were to visit Hong Kong after serving for six months in Vietnam or Hawaii nine months into it. He chose Hong Kong because he didn't feel like waiting nine months. He thought the city was a fascinating, fun place to explore and thoroughly enjoyed the relaxation he needed.

Dennis had little understanding of the war during the time of deployment. He first believed he followed orders for a cause, but eventually, he and his unit came to question the role of the United States in Vietnam. Little did they know, people back home were doing the same. The later years of the Vietnam War were a period of great outrage as it became less justifiable. People took to the streets to protest the war, claiming it was pointless because North Vietnam was bound to win. Coming home was difficult, as the veterans were spat upon and called baby killers. It was a time of great despair for veterans, who were only fulfilling what was demanded of them, whether or not they agreed with the war. Many people directed their anger towards the veterans because they failed to realize this. Another blow was learning that the government labeled the Vietnam ^wwar a police action, ^{because of this,} and the veterans couldn't receive benefits from the VFW. Years after, they still bear the physical and mental scars received during and after the war.

Dennis managed to assimilate back into De Pere after serving in the Air Force for four years, which included one-year in Vietnam. He landed a job at the Fort Howard Paper Mill in Green Bay. He married Mona, and they raised three daughters. Today, they've been together for over fifty years, and are the proud grandparents of six grandchildren and two step-grandchildren. They reside in De Pere and enjoy spending time at their cabin on Maiden Lake in Lakewood. He is also a member of the VFW.

Hearing a story from a Vietnam veteran made me realize that we should be more thankful for veterans, whether we are personally for or against a war they have fought. They are there for us, willing to perform duties that some of us would never consider, and maintain the peace that provides us the freedom we enjoy but often take for granted. I realized it is never easy to serve, and Vietnam veterans were put through hell during and after the conflict. I felt sincerely sorry for Dennis and other veterans for the way they were treated when they returned home from active duty. I was amazed to hear how much detail Dennis recalled and how my knowledge of the Vietnam War expanded. His story is one of perseverance, honor, strength, and one I will not forget, which has made me realize just how lucky we are to have people like him serving our country. It was very selfless of him to go to Vietnam out of consideration for his brother. It is so apparent how proud his family is of him. He is truly an admirable man, and I hope that someday he can take the Honor Flight and that I can be one of the people at the airport to express my gratitude. Veterans like Dennis certainly deserve it.

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I have pictures attached.

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will attach