

Vietnam Veterans of America Essay

By Rachel Helmke

My history classes mostly consisted of learning about various wars, conflicts, and general information: the causes, which countries were involved, who were the major leaders, who "won," etc. The Wisconsin Standards for Social Studies focusing specifically on United States history state it will focus on the following: 1945 - 1980 Post-War Economic and Population Growth, Suburbanization, the Cold War, and Civil Rights; 1980 - present The Modern Era. These time periods fail to specifically mention wars and military actions starting with the Korean War and Vietnam War unlike the time periods featuring the Civil War and World Wars. Failing to acknowledge these wars may indirectly affect how America views and treats the men and/or women who served in the military after the World Wars. This scholarship provided me with the opportunity to tell the perspective and experience of my grandfather, Dennis Helmke, as a Vietnam soldier and veteran.

Before I interviewed my grandfather, I knew very little about my grandfather's time as a soldier in Vietnam. Dennis' wife and my grandmother did not talk about that time either. Therefore, my knowledge and details were limited. It was unclear to my family if he was drafted or enlisted. Regardless, I knew that he fought for our country in Vietnam and was awarded two Purple Hearts. It was evident that this time was important to him by his actions during his retirement. Dennis participated in an Honor Flight, volunteers at the VA in Waukegan, assisted my grandmother in the Quilts of Valor program, and has a military license plate. Besides this, my grandfather had never shared any details of what he went through in the Army. He has always chosen to keep these events in his life private. After speaking with him, I have a better understanding of why this is.

Thank you for the sacrifices you made being away from your family

Dennis Helmke was an only child, a newlywed, a college graduate, and an expecting father when he enlisted in the army. When my grandfather, Dennis Helmke, first arrived in Vietnam, he was frightened, to say the least. Vietnam was a faraway country that he had never been to. The distance, culture, climate, landscape, and weather were all foreign to him. It was unlike any place he had ever seen or traveled to in his life. Living conditions were difficult with a heavy use of bunkers and foxholes. Space was very tight with soldiers often having to double bunk, meaning two soldiers were always in one small hooch. Nothing was your own. Everything was shared.

Being able to stay in contact with his friends and family back home as well as maintaining or developing friendships with other soldiers in the line of duty helped Dennis stay hopeful and maintain the strength needed to keep fighting. He had two friends in Vietnam, one located in his area, and another was a chopper pilot that he would get to spend a few hours with occasionally. Although maintaining these relationships was not easy, he felt fortunate to have this much, considering this was different from and more than many of his fellow soldiers had. Dennis knew of quite a few of his friends who received "Dear John" letters while they were in Vietnam which made it hard for them to deal both psychologically and morally. He expressed his gratitude for one particularly close friend he met while in Vietnam. He was a medevac, also known as a Dust Off, chopper pilot for Dennis briefly, but they did not really get to know each other until after Vietnam. Later on, they met up after the war and have stayed friends and in correspondence ever since. My grandfather spoke very briefly of another friend he made in Vietnam who has since passed from the harmful effects of Agent Orange. I could see how it pained him to even mention this.

Thank you for putting your life on hold to serve our country

In Vietnam, Dennis' MOS or job assignment was 13 Echo 20 as a fire direction center and forward observer for the artillery. As a fire direction center, he worked to control the fire that

was called in from the artillery battery to support the different platoons, insurgents, and rangers that were out in the field for the 82nd Airborne. As a forward observer, he would be out in the field to call in fire which included their artillery battery; gunships consisting of cobras, heavy fire teams, slicks, and "Puff the Magic Dragon." At times, navy jets were also used.

For Dennis, his daily life or routine in Vietnam consisted of a minimum of 12 hours on duty with it often being 16 hours. If he was not on duty, he often tried to get some sleep, but he always had to be prepared or ready to return to his position. His responsibilities varied, though Dennis stated he "might as well have been infantry" when he was in the field. He sustained two Purple Hearts for the injuries and wounds he endured. One was a shot to his left side from an AK-47. They were able to immediately determine that the wound was not serious, and despite the lack of any painkillers, he was able to make a full recovery without any further problems. The second Purple Heart he received was for shrapnel he took to his forehead from a mine.

Dennis was able to recall a few fond memories where "the 82nd Airborne was crazy." For fun, they would do things like take the battery commander's jeep to go off to Saigon to see Round Eyes, an American woman, perform. When stress and anxiety were especially high, his battery commander would protect him and some fellow soldiers while they took some time to unwind and share a drink. This encounter with fun was a rare experience.

In battle, morale is a critical performance factor. Where Dennis was stationed, morale was high as far as internally. They all protected one another with Dennis going as far as to say they were "brothers," regardless of race, creed, background, etc. Many of them formed a bond that has lasted until this day. If Dennis ever meets another person from the 82nd Airborne, it's very simple. All he has to do is yell "Airborne" and they'll come back with "All the way" or vice versa. It is still a close society and always will be.

Thank you for stepping up and choosing to serve when many others did not

This morale and attitude changed for the worse as the war progressed. As news got back to the soldiers of the public's lack of support for their service, the soldiers' mentality was especially hurt. Although Dennis did not experience this for himself, he spoke of other soldiers receiving nasty letters. Media outlets and coverage of the war contributed to this greatly as Vietnam was the first war that really reached the public. The public witnessed the violence and gruesome details of war in a way they had never before. For many, this reality was too much and protests spread like wildfire across the country. These abundant protests called for the troops to be evacuated from Vietnam and brought home. Dennis was grateful to have family that supported his efforts, but this was not true of all veterans by any means. Morale and attitudes concerning their responsibilities were very low because many believed they were not allowed to "complete their mission," the mission being in reference to winning the war when many felt they were already on the verge.

When asked about the biggest challenge that Dennis faced in Vietnam, he stated without hesitation that it was "staying alive." This is a feeling I pray I never have to experience. It is something countless people take for granted including myself. Being able to live freely is something that seems to go hand in hand with the American way of life. This is what my grandfather was fighting for when he served the U.S. in Vietnam. Dennis fought to preserve this American way of life. Dennis believed in patriotism. He believed in fighting for those who could not. He fought for his family back home. He fought for me.

This interview gave me a deeper understanding of the war as a whole, my grandfather's individual experience, and what has shaped my grandfather into the person I know today. When speaking to him, the pain was evident in his facial expressions. He may have made it out of Vietnam alive, but he did not go unharmed by any means. To this day, he suffers from PTSD along with so many other veterans. He credits much of his recovery following the war and his health today to his family, faith, friends, and fellow veterans.

Words cannot do justice to the immense gratitude I feel toward my grandfather and all his fellow veterans. They have risked their lives in the name of the United States of America so that people like me can receive an education, choose a career, start a family, and find happiness. They fought for our freedom. This opportunity to interview my grandfather helped me learn more about this time in history as well as his experiences as a soldier. Our country must do more to take care of our veterans and educate our future generations how to express our gratitude to the men and women who served or are serving in the military. My view of Veteran's Day changed significantly due to this opportunity. Most importantly, I learned silence is not helping our veterans. It is imperative to ask questions and have conversations with them to show our appreciation for the many sacrifices that were made and are being made by those serving our country.