

Stephen Einhorn in Vietnam

Written by Kevin Leedy

In 1968, my uncle, Senior Chief Stephen Einhorn, USN Retired, volunteered to join the United States Navy. The United States had been fighting in Vietnam for more than a decade at that point, and he knew that if he didn't volunteer, he would likely get drafted. That is why he decided to join on his own terms. It was all over the news, and every day there were more and more people protesting the war.

He went to boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois, and that December, he was assigned to his first warship, the USS Hanson (DD-832), a destroyer. He served as a Dispersing Clerk on the destroyer, meaning he handled the ship's finances. They would sell the sailors foreign currency, issue checks, and pay bills. He served for 26 years (1968-1994), and during his service, he went to Vietnam three times. He and his unit worked diligently from the coast; occasionally, he would assist soldiers on the ground when they called in something called a "Fire Mission". A Fire Mission was artillery support from the ships to target enemy positions. He was the Bearings Operator, which meant that when they called in the coordinates of where they thought the enemy was, he was in charge of rotating the gun mount.

There were a lot of things that I took away from interviewing him, but this interview really made me realize that everyone is living their own, separate lives. In a way, talking to him felt like flipping through a history book. Another thing that never occurred to me before interviewing him was how recent the Vietnam War was. Sure, it was 50 years ago, but I've never put it into perspective the timeline between then and now.

One thing that stood out to me during the interview was the compassion he had for not only our country but the people living in it. Throughout the interview, one thing that my uncle, Senior Chief Einhorn, frequently said was the importance of being in the military. After being a Dispersing Clerk for 13 years, he trained and counseled with a Navy SEAL Unit. He then worked as a Recruiter for the rest of his time in the Navy, so I'm sure this was as natural as breathing to him. Part of the reason this stood out so much to me was because with all of the horror stories I've heard of soldiers in Vietnam, I found it surprising that anyone would still be so fond of the military after that. That was when he told me that serving in the military helps teach people the value of freedom. It occurred to me then that there are lots of people who believe that freedom is just given to them. They don't consider all of the people who risked and sacrificed their lives for the freedoms we have today.

Another thing that really surprised me during the interview was finding out how he was treated once he returned home from deployment. Apparently, there were lots of people who would call him names and insult him after he returned home. He didn't seem to really dwell on any of it, but it surprised me that people who were against the war would take it out on those who served. Especially considering that most of the soldiers didn't have a choice; they were just following the directives that were set by civilian leadership.

He also didn't get much training. He went to Boot Camp, but other than that he mostly got "OJT" (On the Job Training). He told me that when he was a counselor, he got to go to Counseling Training, and when he was a Recruiter, he went to a special Recruiting School for a month in Tampa before being sent to a Recruiting Station. In terms of weapons, he was trained on pistols, and he was actually qualified as an expert on rifles and pistols. That was about it though.

When I asked him what the biggest challenge he faced was, I was expecting him to tell me that it was the weather, or the food, or maybe dealing with the people on board. Instead, he told me that the hardest part was being away from his family. He was gone for many months at a time, with the shortest deployment being around seven months. He told me that one of his biggest regrets was missing so much time with his wife and daughter. He told me that he missed birthdays, Christmases, other holidays, and more, and that it is very common in the military. Even when he was working as a recruiter, he still worked six days a week and only got to see his family in the evenings. It was difficult being away from home, but even so, he did his best to remain positive where he could.

After that, we talked a little bit about Veterans' Day. When I asked him what Veterans' Day means to him, he told me that "It gives those of us that are still around time to honor the veterans that worked before us, those that died in combat or old age. It's a time to honor their sacrifices, and when it's our turn, we'll also be celebrated". That really put into perspective how each person who has ever been deployed has their own stories, their own lives, and their own families. As I mentioned earlier, it can be easy to forget that the people around you are living their own, completely different lives. That's why I think that it is so important to learn about your history, not only of your Country, but of your family as well.

I've always been a very curious person, but I've never really bothered to sit down and ask my dad (who is a 23-year Navy veteran) or my uncle questions about their lives. But while conducting this interview, I realized that if I don't sit and ask these questions, I'll never get to learn the stories and history of my family. That's why I think the most important thing I got out of this interview was just the chance to sit down and learn more about my uncle and my

family in general. This led to me learning about my dad's service in Desert Storm as well. It's important to cherish the time you have with your family, and I am glad that this essay gave me the opportunity to do so.