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VVA53 2026 Scholarship Essay

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A Perspective That Lasts a Lifetime

When I was given the name Charles Robert “Bob” Holmes as the Vietnam veteran I would be interviewing, my mom had an immediate reaction. The moment she saw his name, she told me she had worked for him right after college and could not believe the coincidence. Before I even picked up the phone to call him, she had already shared details about his career in human resources consulting, real estate, and his years in Manhattan Beach politics. She also mentioned that he was a graduate of University of California, Los Angeles. As it happens, I was recently accepted to UCLA and am seriously considering attending in the fall. What I expected to be a straightforward assignment suddenly felt personal before it had even begun.

Bob Holmes was born in 1946 and will turn 80 years old this July. He grew up in the Westchester neighborhood of Los Angeles and, like many Southern Californians, he loved the beach. He attended Westchester High School and then enrolled at UCLA, where he took military science courses through the Army ROTC program. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science in June of 1968. At the moment of graduation, he was simultaneously commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He joked that being a Second Lieutenant had at least one clear advantage: “A lot less people can yell at me.” His branch was Engineers, and he was officially designated as a combat engineer, though that assignment took a different direction.

Coming of age in the 1960s, Bob witnessed a deeply divided nation. During his high school and college years, the country was filled with protests, civil unrest, and strong

disagreements about the Vietnam War. This context shaped the world he stepped into when he joined the Army.

Before he ever set foot in Vietnam, Bob was given one of the most emotionally difficult assignments a young officer could receive. While stationed at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro, he served as a body escort. At just 22 years old, with no formal preparation, he was responsible for accompanying the remains of fallen soldiers home, presenting them to grieving families, and helping those families understand the honors their loved ones would receive. Bob described it as “mind-boggling how you grow up” when you are handed that responsibility without preparation. The emotional weight of that role stayed with him, even causing him to skip his five-year high school reunion because he could not shift out of that mindset. Hearing this part of his story made me realize that the impact of war begins long before a soldier ever reaches the battlefield.

Bob’s path to Vietnam came through an Army incentive program that encouraged soldiers to extend their service during a time when troop levels were stretched and casualty rates were high. He chose to extend his service and was deployed from July 1970 to July 1971. During that time, he achieved the rank of Captain and was awarded the Bronze Star.

His assignment in Vietnam was far from typical. Bob served with the Army Security Agency, operating under the cover name the 509th Radio Research Group, an organization so covert it officially did not exist in Vietnam. With a Top-Secret security clearance, he worked as a staff engineer responsible for planning and maintaining facilities that intercepted electronic signals across the country. Later, he transferred to the 1st Brigade, 5th Mechanized Division in Quang Tri Province near the DMZ, where he became an Intelligence Operations Officer. In this role, he analyzed information from multiple sources, including electronic intelligence, scout reports, and prisoner interrogations, to determine enemy activity and movement.

After returning from Vietnam, Bob built a successful civilian career. He worked for major corporations, including Twentieth Century Film Corporation and Hughes Aircraft Company, before founding his own consulting firm, Strategic Management Group, where my mom later worked as his part-time executive assistant. It was a consulting firm specializing in human resources, personnel management, and strategic planning. He later served his community as a member of the Manhattan Beach City Council for twelve years, including three terms as mayor. Even now, he remains active in his community and continues to enjoy activities like body surfing, attending concerts, and traveling.

When I sat down to interview Bob Holmes, I expected to hear stories about combat and danger. Those stories were there, but what stood out most was something else entirely. His experience in Vietnam was not just about war. It was about perspective.

The lesson that impacted me the most came when I asked what Vietnam had given him that stayed with him throughout his life. He pointed to two things. First, he explained that the experience pushed him harder than he ever thought he could go, and he discovered he was capable of far more than he had known. Second, and more surprisingly, he described a shift in perspective that has stayed with him ever since. He told us that when he came back to civilian life and encountered something he did not want to do, he had a private conversation with himself. He called it "Bob had a talk with Bob." He would remind himself that he had survived a war where his life had been in danger. Compared to that, most everyday problems seemed much smaller. That mindset changed how he approached challenges, and hearing him describe it so matter-of-factly made me think about how often I allow small frustrations to feel much bigger than they really are. That kind of internal reset is a remarkable tool.

I also asked Bob what personality traits he observed in fellow veterans who handled the challenges of service and homecoming the best. He believed that those who maintained a positive and upbeat attitude dealt with difficulties better than those who were not. It was not about ignoring hard things, but about choosing how to respond to them. Bob himself is a perfect example of this. Throughout our entire conversation, he was funny, self-deprecating, and engaged. He told stories about himself. He laughed at his own mistakes. That attitude made his experiences feel more relatable and showed me how much perspective shapes the way we handle difficult situations.

Before he ever arrived in Vietnam, though, Bob had already been forced to grow up faster than most people his age. The body escort duty he described at Fort MacArthur was something I had never considered as part of a soldier's experience. He was 22 years old, barely older than I am now, knocking on the doors of grieving families with no training and no script. He described it as one of the most formative experiences of his life. I think about that when I consider my own transitions ahead, including going off to college. Bob was handed weight I cannot fully imagine at an age very close to mine, and he carried it.

Finally, there was the story of his last day in Vietnam. He volunteered for a combat helicopter mission, flew in a Cobra with a weapons system that failed completely shortly after takeoff, and completed the mission with nothing but his pistol and artillery called in from altitude. He told the story, laughing at his own poor judgment as a young officer, calling it "probably the stupidest thing I had done in my life." While the story had humor, it also revealed an important lesson about the risks of impulsive decisions and the role that luck can play in survival.

I came into this interview knowing a little about Bob Holmes through my mom's stories. I came out of it realizing that history is not just something we read about in textbooks. It is made up of real people and real experiences that continue to shape lives long after the events themselves have ended. Bob Holmes will turn 80 this July, and the things he learned at 22 are still worth hearing. His story reminded me that even a short period of time can have a lasting impact, and that the way we respond to challenges can define who we become. As I prepare for my own future, including the possibility of attending UCLA like Bob did decades before me, I am grateful for the lessons he shared with me.