

Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53 Scholarship Essay Program By: Maya Nawachi

“It’s the smell,” Gregory Green said when describing the pungent and pervasive smell that permeated throughout Vietnam. Green, who now lives in Diamond Bar with his wife, is a Vietnam Veteran who helped found the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 53. Green had only been 18 when he had decided to enlist in the military.

Growing up in Chicago, he had played football all throughout his childhood, but had become injured in his senior year. Unable to secure a football scholarship due to his injury, he chose to enlist in the military after hearing John F. Kennedy’s speech emphasized the importance of supporting South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. In 1967, he joined the Navy, attending a boot camp in the Great Lakes, Illinois. In March 1968, he was deployed from Long Beach, California, as part of the Western Pacific tour on USS McKean DD-784. Green and his team convoyed with several destroyers and aircraft carriers off the coast of North Vietnam. On his first deployment, Green served as a signalman, where he was responsible for the communications between ships in the area. Signalmen often operated radios, telephones, and teletype machines to provide critical communication efforts for troops. His time as a signalman came to an end in November 1968.

Green’s second deployment was from August 1969 to July 1970. This time, he was a part of the inshore undersea warfare group in Nha Trang & Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam. As a part of the Navy, he again served in radio communications and a part of the small boat operations team, where he stopped and searched various Vietnamese watercraft. He was also a member of the Navy reconnaissance team, providing surveillance to support the Special Forces Army. While Green enjoyed the camaraderie that being a part of the Navy had provided, his time deployment also came with enormous challenges.

By the end of the 1960s, efforts to continue deploying troops into Vietnam largely grew unpopular. American troops had been deployed to Vietnam for several years by this point, resulting in heavy American casualties and high costs, with almost no end in sight. This resulted in American support declining throughout the war. As a result, President Nixon led the effort to slowly withdraw American troops while equipping South Vietnamese troops to take over the fighting. This was known as Vietnamization.

Green, who had been deployed during the center of Vietnamization, had started training South Vietnamese sailors to take over some of the positions on these boats. One of the most harrowing experiences that Green remembers is that one night around 2 am, the siren in his barrack had suddenly gone off as the announcement “this is not a drill” repeated in the loudspeaker. His Vietnamese counterpart was supposed to come into the bunker. At first, Green had been anxious but convinced that he would be coming in a few minutes. However, as the minutes stretched on, his counterpart had never shown up. Standing there alone, waiting for someone who never came, the war suddenly felt real in a way it never had before.

Green had honorably separated from the Navy in 1971, but remained in the reserves and retired from it in 1993. After the Navy, Green had gone on to attend UCLA under the GI bill, but later transferred to CSU Long Beach to obtain his master's degree. Green described how crucial it was for the support of his wife for him to continue working after his experience in the war. He went on to work at Northrop Grumman and climbed through the ranks.

Even now, Green recalls that he “can still remember the smell of Vietnam.” In the same way that Green continues to remember the smell, the aftereffects of the Vietnam War continue.

Green remembers how some of his friends who were serving alongside him later struggled with PTSD and drug overdoses. Many veterans of Vietnam experienced PTSD, leading to panic attacks, depression, and a sense of isolation from society. Substance abuse also became a major issue, with many using drugs as a mechanism to cope with the experiences that they faced during the war. Hearing Green’s stories about how his own comrades had fallen into hard times, such as struggling with PTSD, depression, and acting up, made me feel the long-term impacts of the war painfully real. While I will never be able to fully understand the pain that many veterans felt, hearing Green describe losing some of his friends in the troops provided me with some sense of the hardships that many of the veterans faced. The impacts of war are beyond just the immediate deaths. Many veterans face mental health challenges and substance abuse long after the war. The psychological toll is often even invisible and is found only long after the war. While interviewing Green, he explained that “he rarely ever talks about the Vietnam War with anybody” and how many veterans are the same. Talking about it brings up the traumatic experiences that many faced, revealing the emotional difficulty of sharing their experiences of the war.

Talking to Mr. Green pushed me to recognize the importance of honoring veterans and the critical role that they have served in paving the society that we live in today. Mr. Green went through an incredible amount of hardship, whether that be his troubled upbringing before enlisting in the war or slowly losing his fellow troops even during deployment. Even when he came back, many veterans were not welcomed back with the warmest tone. Yet, he persevered. Green later earned his master's degree and continued an illustrious career at Northrop Grumman.

Listening to his story, it highlighted the critical role of resilience in overcoming adversity, but it also reminded me how important it is to honor veterans not just for their service but also to provide them with the critical support that they need in transitioning back to society. Honoring servicemen doesn't just mean recognizing their service, but also providing them with active support, such as rehabilitation facilities for substance abuse, and helping to treat servicemen struggling with PTSD. Mr. Green’s story is not just one of service, but of resilience, and it is a reminder that the impact of war does not end when soldiers return home.

