

Felicity Button - Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 53 Scholarship Essay Submission

Our generation, in particular, struggles to empathize with different perspectives because we've only ever learned history through pixels on a screen, never through the life experiences of others. Seeking to rectify this, I interviewed Vietnam Veteran Harry Palmer about the truth of being a soldier in Vietnam to gain an understanding of the reality millions of Americans my age faced in the nineteen seventies. As a member of the Class of 2026, I entered this interview ready to hear Mr. Palmer's story and left with a deep veneration for his heroics and philosophy.

I was connected to Mr. Palmer through my community service as Redondo's Youth Representative for the Honor Convoy of the Placentia Heritage Parade, where I served as a parade announcer to celebrate the heroics of our Veterans. Towards the beginning of the interview, Mr. Palmer confided to me that despite having been raised in a military family, he hadn't felt much motivation to pursue a college degree or enlist in the military after high school. He explained that he felt stuck and that the world was passing him by too fast. However, once he learned the Marine Corps tradition: Marines never leave a Marine behind, he felt a strong sense of courage to enlist. So, when he got drafted on Christmas Eve that year, he decided to uphold that sacred tradition by enlisting in the Marine Corps. Going into the interview, I hadn't expected to relate to Mr. Palmer's life experiences, assuming that decades between our teenage years would be enough to isolate our perspectives. However, I soon realized that growing up unsure about the future is a universally timeless experience, which gave me a sense of assurance that everything would be okay. Mr. Palmer's courageous enlistment taught me that the right path will be made clear to you once it's time, not before and not too late. For Mr. Palmer, enlisting in the Marine Corps was a way to serve his country, and for me, pursuing a career in Marketing is my path.

As a proud Marine of the United States Marine Corps, Harry Palmer served in the Vietnam War from January 11th, 1966, to January 10th, 1968, with the 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 3rd Amphibious Assault Battalion in Chu Lai. His duties included providing armored support, running supplies out to various base camps, and conducting river patrols. To my surprise, Mr. Palmer revealed that the river snakes could never be scarier than the prospect of being ambushed in the wide open. The fact that he preferred the prospect of facing deadly snakes over facing the enemy in combat stressed to me the severity of this war and its effects on our soldiers. If I hadn't interviewed Mr. Palmer, I never would've understood the gravity of his service with the Marines, which strengthened my respect for our military and the sacrifices they make to keep us safe. In the spring of 1967, his service took him to Marble Mountain, where he operated as an Amphibious Warfare School Instructor, teaching young recruits both basic education and practical application on the field. Mr. Palmer's time at Marble Mountain taught me

that the best legacy is created through teaching leadership to others, which I am determined to bring into my future career as a Creative Marketing Strategist.

While his active service ended on January 10th, 1968, it marked the start of his readjustment to civilian life after thirteen months of active duty. Mr. Palmer revealed that after returning from Vietnam, he and his military friends joined a college fraternity in hopes of “Making up for the thirteen months we lost,” which inevitably led to excessive partying that hurt both their studies and sense of direction in life. Hearing how lost he felt trying to compensate for time he’d never get back helped me realize that the best satisfaction comes from moving on rather than dwelling on the past. After Mr. Palmer graduated from the University of Washington with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, he dedicated more than a decade to mentoring fraternity chapters at UCLA, USC, Cal State Long Beach, and Pepperdine so they wouldn’t repeat the same mistakes. To me, this full-circle moment emphasized the idea that true leadership is shown through helping others, as Mr. Palmer used his college-life experiences to mentor young men and keep them on the right path. The way Mr. Palmer demonstrated self-growth and leadership by paying it forward encourages me to use the mistakes I’ve made as a teaching moment rather than a hindrance, which will positively benefit my self-growth in college and beyond. Without this interview with Mr. Palmer, I never would’ve learned about the importance of sharing my life experiences to ensure the success of others. His advice proves that online articles can never replicate the sincere connection created through sharing life experiences.

By far, the most important piece of advice that Mr. Palmer shared with me was to never take the easy way out of a situation because “You’re going to be challenged all along the way through life, so do it the right way.” Throughout his life, Mr. Palmer had multiple opportunities to take the easy way out, such as dodging the draft, securing a low-risk position in the Marines, or pretending that the excessive partying wasn’t affecting his work-life balance in college. Yet, he knew what was necessary to help himself and protect others, opting to solve these problems rather than taking a convenient shortcut. The purpose of his advice isn’t to instill anxiety in the recipient, but rather to encourage them to face their challenges head-on and solve them rather than taking the easy way out for the sake of comfort. His integrity and bravery are a major inspiration for my life post-high school. Before meeting Mr. Palmer, I’d gotten comfortable preferring convenience over challenges because I felt I’d earned it, having made it to my Senior year of High School. However, his advice brought me to my senses, as I realized that the challenges in my life are just beginning, and I need to face them to grow, which isn’t something I would’ve learned online. Mr. Palmer’s honest advice left me with a sense of courage to address and solve the obstacles in my life, which I will carry with me as I move forward towards college and eventually enter the workforce.

While I initially sought out this interview to win a scholarship, no amount of money can put a price tag on the advice I learned through Mr. Palmer's integrity and courage, as displayed by serving in the Vietnam War to protect our freedom, mentoring the youth of multiple college fraternities, and seeking out challenges rather than taking the easy way out, which all emphasize the importance of using leadership to serve others. Through his actions, I learned that by leading the next generation, we ensure a better society moving forward. His philosophical advice and heroics have left me determined to give back to my community as I move onward from high school to tackle the great unknowns of adulthood. In a world dominated by digital headlines, it's necessary to cherish people's life experiences to carry on their legacies of heroism, leadership, and integrity.

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