Vietnam Veterans of America Scholarship: The Story of Shawn Brown - Onyinyechukwu Onwuka

Life is a fragile thing, fragile in ways we often take for granted. It's easy to fall into the comfort of routine, to move forward in the present without taking a moment to look back. But there are those whose lives remind us that we must honor the past, for it is not just history but the foundation of the ground we walk on today. Each step we take is on the pavement laid by those who came before us, by their sacrifices, struggles, and the weight of their experiences. As an individual with a deep admiration for those who have served and sacrificed before me, I've always felt a profound respect for veterans, particularly those who fought during the tumultuous years of the Vietnam War. One such individual whose story left a lasting impression on me that I had the honor of interviewing is Shawn Brown, a Vietnam War veteran who began to serve in the United States Marine Corps in December of 1967.

Mr. Brown's story begins not in the jungles of Vietnam, but in the tumultuous and often painful environment of his early life. Born into a dysfunctional family in Lima, Ohio, he moved to Los Angeles, California, in 1961. His childhood was far from easy. His father, who had remarried, was emotionally distant and frequently absent. Neither his stepmother, father, nor even his grandmother offered the love or support that every child deserves. As a biracial child in an era dominated by the harsh realities of Jim Crow laws, Mr. Brown faced not only the neglect of his family but also the constant reminder of his difference from the society around him. The weight of familial indifference and racial prejudice left deep marks on Mr. Brown, shaping much of his early life.

Mr. Brown joined the Marine Corps in search of stability, motivated not by war but by the desire to build a better life for his pregnant girlfriend. He graduated high school in June 1967 and was in Vietnam by December, often reflecting on how many soldiers, himself included, were just kids, fresh out of high school, thrown into a brutal war.

Mr. Brown was assigned to Mike Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, as a machine gunner, despite his test scores suggesting he was better suited for a role in electronics. Race played a significant role in his assignment. During the 18 weeks of Marine boot camp, the phrase "Kill, kill, kill" was drilled into him repeatedly, emphasizing the dehumanizing nature of combat. As a machine gunner, he was one of the first soldiers targeted on the battlefield due to the nature of his weapon, which could unleash 600 to 800 rounds per minute. The brutality of war was not something Mr. Brown had anticipated when he joined, and over time, he became disillusioned with the very idea of fighting. What began as a sense of honor gradually turned into a realization of the futility of the conflict.

Despite the low pay of $130 per month, Mr. Brown found a sense of belonging and purpose within the Marine Corps. The camaraderie and loyalty among his fellow soldiers provided him

with a semblance of stability, but as he witnessed the brutal realities of war, his values were challenged. He saw innocent civilians caught in the crossfire and grew more discontent with the conduct of some South Vietnamese soldiers (ARVN). His idealized view of the war crumbled as he realized that the deaths of so many people, both American and Vietnamese, were pointless.

Mr. Brown's determination to survive the war strengthened over time, especially after witnessing the high death toll among his fellow soldiers. Many of the young men killed in action were only 18 or 19 years old, just out of high school. The average age of soldiers killed in Vietnam was 22, these were still young lives lost too soon.

Mr. Brown then mentions his last battle on Hill 512 in May 1968. Mr. Brown recalled how his unit was devastated, with only a few soldiers walking out alive. His bond with his fellow Marines, particularly Darryl Ponell, another machine gunner, remained strong. Despite being physically injured, Mr. Brown did not want to stay behind while his comrades continued the fight. His loyalty to his fellow soldiers kept him in the fight. This loyalty, forged in the crucible of war, would remain one of the few constants in his life.

The mental and emotional toll of the war, coupled with the racism Mr. Brown faced upon returning home, made his post-war life incredibly difficult. Not only was he despised as a veteran, but his biracial identity made him a target of racial hatred in a country still struggling with the remnants of Jim Crow laws. His service, which he had once believed would bring him honor, had instead left him feeling alienated from his own country.

Mr. Brown's service in Vietnam was marked by a series of traumatic events. He was wounded in battle and received a Purple Heart, but the physical injuries were only part of the story. The emotional and psychological toll of the war, he encountered upon returning home, left deep scars that would affect him for the rest of his life. After returning to the U.S., he took a symbolic stand by burning his medals as a protest against the war and the government that had sent him and so many others to fight in it. He felt that the government had never kept its promises to the soldiers who fought, and the war, which had taken place during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, only deepened his frustration. Which I believe is truly monumental.

Mr. Brown's story has had a profound impact on me, not only because of the immense sacrifices he made during the war but also because of the lasting emotional scars he continues to carry. One of the most important lessons I learned from my interview with Mr. Brown is the complexity of war and the toll it takes on the individuals who serve. The psychological scars of war are often invisible, and the emotional burden of combat can stay with a person long after the fighting has ended. I learned from Mr. Brown's story that loyalty and camaraderie in the face of adversity can be some of the most powerful forces in a person's life. The bonds he formed with his fellow soldiers provided him with a sense of purpose and belonging, even in the darkest of times. These relationships were among the few things that gave Mr. Brown comfort during and after the war.

In 2013, Mr. Brown was diagnosed with cancer, likely linked to his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. His journey was documented in letters reflecting his strength, mirroring his resilience in combat. Despite the pain and fear, he found empowerment, particularly during visits with his compassionate doctor, Dr. Teddy. Facing surgeries, chemotherapy, and uncertainty, Mr. Brown fought with the same warrior spirit that saw him through Vietnam, expressing his resolve: "I thought I wouldn't survive at least four times in Vietnam, but I did. Why not survive five times?"

As I reflect on Mr. Brown's story, I realized that the pavement we walk on today was paved by people like him, people whose sacrifices and struggles have shaped our world, even if we don't always see it. His journey, filled with pain and perseverance, teaches us to acknowledge those who have come before us and to honor their experiences. Mr. Brown's life is a testament to the quiet strength of those who have carried the weight of history, those who have fought battles both seen and unseen, and those who continue to walk the path of healing. His legacy is a reminder that we must never forget the past and that we must never take the present for granted. Every step we take is on the pavement that they laid before us. I will always carry with me the lessons Mr. Brown shared about the human cost of war, the importance of loyalty, and the emotional scars that many veterans continue to carry. His story reminds me to appreciate the sacrifices made by those who served before me and to never forget the true cost of war.