

## **Vietnam Veterans of America - South Bay Chapter 53 - Scholarship Essay**

“You know what they say about us veterans,” Tim Brown looked at me as we were getting up to leave. The metal walls of the hangar-turned-storage-space for the Western Museum of Flight made his words bounce from every angle, surrounding us.

“No?” my nervous laugh perforated the silence as I shook my head.

“Most of us are not really that truthful about our experiences.” He was smiling, his tone light, but his words heavy.

At that moment, I didn’t know what to think. Was the past hour of stories nothing but a false tale? But his earlier words dawned on me: “Shot at... shooting people... I don’t ask... he won’t talk.” For many of his fellow veterans, it was hard enough to face the reality of their experiences in the shadowy reaches of their minds. Speaking those stories aloud would be an insurmountable task. “You can’t handle the truth,” he said, quoting the movie “A Few Good Men.”

Life for many Vietnam War veterans would look a lot like throwing a blanket over a mess of extraordinary circumstances and extraordinary psychological baggage. But Tim Brown, a member of Long Beach chapter 756 of the Vietnam Veterans of America, didn’t look extraordinary. He spoke candidly, answered questions freely, and ate my peace-offering banana muffins like a normal human being. However, his relaxed demeanor belied two years of life-changing service during the Vietnam War, which he spoke of with surprising clarity and detail. He told me multiple times that his story was boring, that I should talk to the men who had been in the line of fire, with their harrowing tales of near-death experiences. But what Tim Brown went through was far from boring. It was quiet, yes, but it was impactful. It wasn’t glamorously heroic, but it was brave. And most of all, it was the picture of an ordinary man making the absolute most of every part of his life, from training to service to return.

Tim Brown was studying at the University of Arizona in 1966, but he’d likely contest the word studying. An intelligent student, he majored in chemical engineering, with a particular affinity for drinking beer and playing cards with his fraternity. But the careless fun of early adulthood was about to meet its abrupt end. As the blistering heat of summer faded into a warm autumn, marking the beginning of a new school year, the inked black words “ORDER FOR TRANSFERRED MAN TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION” landed in Tim’s hands. A draft notice, one for a controversial and gruesome war. It would lead Tim from his fraternity house in

September of 1966 to three different military bases for more than a year of pushing his physical and mental capabilities to their limit in preparation for the Vietnam war. When on the field, he was a part of the 815 Engineer Battalion in Pleiku, and the 299th Combat Engineer Battalion in Kontum. He described landing in South Vietnam in a haze of humid, muggy spring air. It was April of 1968, the bloody Tet offensive still fresh on everyone's minds.

"My first thoughts on it..." Tim said. "It's hotter than hell... there's wire on the windows... to keep people from throwing explosives in." And so began Tim Brown's service to the United States of America as an engineer in the army. He managed construction teams to build a road for convoys to provide for troops. He worked tirelessly to build bridges and buildings. His work kept him from the direct line of fire, and I got the sense that he was thankful for the lack of action. But his years in Vietnam didn't leave him unscathed.

There are so many little stories that Tim describes, pride in his voice as he tells me that he didn't lose any members of his platoon, a feat he attributes to good luck. He talks about minesweeping by foot with a metal detector, death an ever-present reality as tanks trailed him in case of an ambush. He talks about hearing the sounds of a convoy on that very road being ambushed over the radio: "It sounds really exciting, I mean, it's like listening to a war."

There's a grim humor in his voice as he describes losing a Battalion Commander, searching and searching, only to find that he was "out just having a good time... it gets exciting when you're getting shot at. Nothing so exciting as getting shot at and missed. Nothing so exciting." Despite the danger, or maybe because of it, there was a sort of adrenaline and enthusiasm in the men. Death was so near at all times that it became impossible to dwell on the fear of it for too long. Everyone lived day by day, hour by hour, focused only on the task at hand.

Tim's tone shifts when he speaks of the only man under him who died, a Vietnamese laborer. Despite his frequent interaction with the workers who directly labored to build structures, the language barrier prevented meaningful communication. And yet, Tim gestures to the hangar we're in with tears in his eyes and tells me that the man he lost had fallen to his death from the rafters of a building like this one. He pauses.

"It still hurts. I really didn't know him. But he died because our guys couldn't treat him, or *wouldn't* treat him because he's Vietnamese... it was just really unnecessary." It's obvious that fifty-some years later, the wounds are still easily reopened, a testament to both his empathy and the war's psychological effect on him. There are other moments too, when I ask him how war

changed his psyche and he describes the feeling of fear at night. While supervising guards during moonless hours, he'd jump at every little sound in pitch black. For months back at home, Tim slept with a knife under his pillow, describing himself as "a little bit nuts." He talks of coming back in May of 1969 as he does everything else, with a sense of measured lightness and thoughtful reflection. Somehow, despite the years he spent in grueling training and overseas at war, Tim is grateful above all else.

"[It] was an eye-opener," he says; maturity came on the fast track, and his compassion for others around the world is evident to this day. While it was a chapter of his life that was undoubtedly integral to his character, it was devastating to his physical health. Between Parkinsons, cancer, and hearing loss, Tim is still suffering the consequences of his service more than forty years ago.

With this in mind, I had one last question to ask: "if you could share one message with my generation, what would it be?" Tim's answer was immediate: go talk to a person in active service. He wants young adults to know what life in the military is like in the present day. Because, despite all of his insight into the Vietnam War, Tim Brown doesn't think of himself as a prime example of service. He's an ordinary man with extraordinary experiences, and an extraordinary outlook on life because of it.

Tim Brown taught me an important lesson that day: to use every chapter of my life for good. Whether positive or negative, everything has the potential to be intentional character building. For Tim, no part of his service was wasted, and while he wouldn't wish military life on his kids or grandkids, he "would not trade it for anything." It's another example of the ways in which he used serving overseas to make him a better person, more sensitive to the realities of others' lives. Towards the end of our discussion, he tells me: "When I came back, I don't feel like I was messed up, but I was just very motivated." And that's quite a clear picture of his entire story thus far. There's no bitterness or anger left in him, although his experiences could've easily led to it. Instead, what he carries is a strong conviction that he's lucky to be born here, a willingness to share his story, and a care for those who still live in war-torn countries. It's a great privilege to converse with such a man of good character, and I can only hope that I do his story some small measure of justice in giving it to the wider world.