

## Vietnam Veterans Scholarship, Lessons from Darryl Webb

I interviewed Darryl Webb. He served from October 1968 to April 1970 in the Marine Corps, 9th regiment, 3rd division.

Last year, I learned about the Vietnam War in my AP US History class. I read the textbook, scribbled down notes about key terms such as the Domino Theory, and tried to memorize facts about the war for my test. However, I never thought twice about what I was reading. A year later, interviewing Mr. Webb was an incredibly enlightening experience. Hearing his personal testimony corrected many of my misconceptions, led me to a new level of appreciation for our veterans, and gave me a much more personal perspective on how the war impacted real people.

Mr. Webb told a lot of stories about his grueling experience in the war. Combat operations in the DMZ lasted 7-8 days at a time, during which he received 4 hours of sleep a night and only one meal a day; he carried 92 pounds of weight on his body every day as he trekked through the jungle. There were numerous mosquitoes, but he couldn't slap them because of the noise and couldn't use mosquito repellent because of the smell. To an extent, this reminded me of my Boy Scout trip to Northern Tier, where we spent a week canoeing and portaging through a section of the Great Lakes. We covered a lot of distance and it was easily the most physically demanding week of my life, but still I ate 3 meals a day, got more than 4 hours of sleep at night, and didn't have to live with the constant fear of ambushes. I can't imagine how physically and mentally difficult it would have been to fight in Vietnam. Everyone knows that people in the military have to be tough, but hearing these realities from someone that experienced them firsthand made it so much easier to visualize and understand.

However, he also showed me that people in the military don't just have to be strong, but also smart and innovative. Winning a war requires accurate shooting and having enough soldiers, but equally as important is the ability to adapt and come up with solutions to unexpected problems. For example, Mr. Webb's unit lost a lot of soldiers to their own clay mines. When no one was looking, the Vietnamese would flip the direction of mines, so when they were detonated, American soldiers were killed. To fix this problem, they put a white piece of tape on one side of the mine and had a spotter that could see if the tape was still facing the right way, even in the dark. If they could no longer see the tape, they knew that the Vietnamese had turned the mine around, so they shouldn't detonate it. Many people think of soldiers as physically strong men that just take orders, but this story shows that being a soldier also requires a high level of intelligence to react to what happens on the battlefield. Before this interview, I had always assumed that fighting on the frontlines was for people that weren't smart enough for a different job, but now realize that those on the front lines must be among the most innovative and adaptive people in the country.

As a result of this adaptivity, Mr. Webb gained a lot of benefits from serving that I never previously considered. For example, the military taught him to never assume anything. In combat, when you make assumptions, you die because the enemy is planning for you to make that assumption, and plan their ambushes accordingly. He took this lesson and applied this to his future work. Many companies in his industry were discarding old data, assuming that it was obsolete and that newer data would be more useful in creating their models. Instead of assuming, Mr. Webb decided to analyze the old data that many people deemed useless, which actually became very beneficial in creating a model that was able to project more accurately in the long-term. Through this, I learned that it is critical to question assumptions, especially when the stakes are high. This is not only important during war, but also useful in everyday situations that require critical thinking.

I also learned that there are many misconceptions about Vietnam Veterans that are wrong. For instance, many (including myself, before the interview) thought that most Vietnam Veterans were drafted, when in actuality, the majority, including Mr. Webb, chose to enlist. This shows that serving in the military isn't something they were forced to do; it's something they wanted to do. They knew their country was in need and wanted to serve, even if it cost them their lives. I think that decision deserves a lot of respect. Another unfortunate misconception about the soldiers in Vietnam is that they were just a bunch of undisciplined soldiers that used drugs and smoked pot. However, Mr. Webb showed me this wasn't true. They always had to remain vigilant on their missions, and the strong smell of pot would linger for days, revealing their position. Thus, the soldiers knew they had to avoid pot if they wanted to stay alive. Some people might disrespect Vietnam Veterans because of these misconceptions, but in actuality, the soldiers fought resiliently and ought to be respected for their sacrifices and valor.

In addition to showing respect to these veterans, we also need to show them grace because of how difficult it is to adjust back to civilian life after the war. Mr. Webb talked about his experience with PTSD, which was especially difficult because PTSD wasn't well understood at the time. Even today, he can still envision all of the bodies that he had to dig up, which remains deeply traumatic. As a result, there's been several instances where his trauma resurfaced in a way that he couldn't control. For instance, when someone said that the GI Bill was a waste of money during a college class, he physically picked up the person and threw him in anger. A year and a half might not seem long, but the war took a heavy toll on both his physical and mental state. This was compounded by the fact that the response that Mr. Webb received when he returned to California was often hateful as many people did not approve of the war; this lack of appreciation was truly tragic, given all that the veterans had sacrificed. This made me realize that the impact of the war on soldiers isn't just limited to what happens during their time on the battlefield, but it extends to the rest of their lives, in ways the rest of the world can't see.

In conclusion, as I talked with Mr. Webb, I realized that veterans, especially those that served in Vietnam, deserve much more recognition and appreciation than I previously gave them.

What they do is incredibly difficult, and they selflessly sacrificed for the sake of the rest of us. We get a day off of school for Veterans Day once a year and whenever I go to a baseball game they always honor the veterans there, but beyond that, veterans aren't recognized much at all. One saying I learned on a Boy Scout trip to the USS Midway is that "Freedom is not free." This is something that our culture, and especially my generation, often forgets. I am thankful that you asked me to interview a Vietnam Veteran; through interviewing Mr. Webb, I realized their sacrifices are more than just statistics in history; they represent a responsibility for my generation to recognize, understand, and honor.