

Ruben, our local neighborhood Vietnam Vet

By: Roberto Lucha

When I think of the Vietnam War veterans I've met, one person stands out above all others, our old family friend Ruben Torres. Even as a young adult, I noticed that Ruben carried himself differently from most people. He was meticulous and always so careful about who he let into his home or even close to him. He had a presence that was both inviting and scary. It was easy to see that he had lived through experiences that most of us couldn't imagine.

Ruben had returned from Vietnam in the early 1970s. Having served in the 2nd Battalion, 12th Field Artillery from 1969 to 1972, he carried memories of a war that had changed him forever. One of the first things you noticed about him was his mustache, a thick, dark mustache he had grown during or just after the war, and which to this day, he never shaved. He had a sharp sense of awareness, and I quickly learned that he noticed everything. The way he checked the locks in his house, the way he scanned the neighborhood before stepping outside, the careful way he always looked out the window when he visited others, all of it suggested a lifetime of vigilance and an almost sense of paranoia. I never heard him speak about the war in detail, but it was clear that it had left its mark. The lessons he carried from Vietnam shaped not only the way he protected himself but also how he protected his family.

Soon after returning home, Ruben married his high school sweetheart, Carmen. They soon had two daughters, and life seemed to finally lead him in a positive path. He became a correctional officer. Ruben thrived in that environment because it mirrored some of the order he had learned to trust during the war. The clear rules and a system where attention to detail could make a difference between safety and danger. I remember hearing stories from Heidi, his youngest daughter and my mom's good friend, about Ruben's work at the prison. He wasn't the type to raise his voice unnecessarily or to use force for intimidation, but he noticed things others missed. Ruben noticed how inmates moved, their changes in tone or expression, the tension building before any confrontation would boil over. His colleagues respected him because he was strict but fair, and they learned quickly that testing him was a mistake.

Ruben's greatest care went to his family. I would often hear their jokes about how Ruben gave them both of his daughters pepper spray for Christmas one year, along with self-defense classes, emphasizing not only their safety but also their ability to protect themselves. Ruben didn't view these gifts as unusual because, in his mind, they were practical tools and just made sense. That protective instinct extended into daily life; rules about curfews, walking home alone, or having friends over were strict but intended to keep his daughters safe. He balanced vigilance with teaching them independence, even if it didn't always feel that way to them.

At the prison, Ruben's mentoring of younger officers reflected his Army background as well. One young officer asked about his experiences in Vietnam, and Frank decided not to answer. But he shared lessons in observation, patience, and discipline, the same skills that had kept him

alive during combat. "Watch their hands," he instructed. "Don't get comfortable. That's when you miss something. Respect isn't trust." When Ramirez noticed tension building in the yard, Ruben nodded in quiet approval. His guidance came from a lifetime of understanding threats and maintaining control, shaped by both the battlefield and the prison walls.

Despite the intensity of his vigilance, Ruben had moments of generosity and quiet kindness that defined who he was beyond the war and the rules. I remember seeing him help a neighbor who had slipped on her front steps or quietly fixing a child's broken bike. These small actions contrasted with his intimidating presence, showing that his cautiousness was never cruelty, but rather it was grounded in a sense of responsibility.

I also saw how the war had shaped his nighttime habits. His wife would sometimes wake to find him awake, eyes fixed on shadows that weren't there. He rarely spoke about it, but when he would mention something about his time in the service, his stare would immediately transform into a blank stare, as if he was replaying a movie that he did not want to ever see again. She knew that the war had changed them all. She had waited for Ruben, the young man to come back as her sweetheart, but Ruben, the man who would become her life partner returned, full of traumas and experiences that would shape their everyday life.

His life taught me to recognize the invisible struggles that shape people. Not everyone who seems intimidating is unkind, and not everyone who is disciplined is unfeeling. Often, the most challenging personalities have the deepest dedication to those they love. Observing Ruben's interactions with his daughters, his wife, and the neighborhood, I learned the value of preparation, the importance of responsibility, and the sense of duty we don't see often anymore.

When Ruben finally sat in his chair at home without immediately angling toward the door, it wasn't because the world had changed. It was because he had trained his family well, prepared them for challenges, and built a life where vigilance was balanced by love. His Army service had shaped him, but it also gave him the tools to be a protector, a mentor, and a father. Through him, I learned that the lessons of the battlefield extend far beyond the warzone, shaping one's character, family, and community in ways both quiet and profound.

Meeting Ruben and observing the way he lived taught me a lot about resilience, responsibility, and the quiet burdens carried by veterans. He was a man shaped by war, yes, but also a man who translated that experience into love and protection for his family, and into vigilance and fairness in his work. Through him, I saw the complexity of a veteran's life after service, the combination of strength, caution, and the deep need to protect those who mattered most.