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On March 3rd I met Mr. Brian Heyman for coffee. A man of good spirit, a green shirt and gleaming pride entered my local spot on Artesia Blvd. Amongst the brewing of coffee, tea, and other drinks, we found a small table in the back, and it was here where our nearly two hour conversation unfolded. This was for me not just a typical conversation; it was one that had moments of joy, moments of pain, and most importantly it was one that I was honored to be a part of. After the discussion ended I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude and clarity for what it truly meant to be a Vietnam Veteran.

Our conversation began with Mr. Heyman's early life.

Mr. Brian Heyman grew up as one of 11 children from Huntington Park, California. I had to ask him to repeat that statistic the first time he said it, out of mere disbelief. For Heyman his six brothers, five sisters and two bedrooms made early life tight to say the least. When he enlisted in the Air Force, he joked, "It was the first time I had my own bed." At home he was surrounded by strictly mannered dinner, mixed with frequent family time. Mr. Heyman's father worked two jobs, working overtime, to cover the large bills that came with a 13 member household. "You had to either wake up at 5AM or stay up 'til midnight to talk to him, and it was always over black coffee," he told me, as the hot coffee arrived at our table. His father was a World War II veteran, and Mr. Heyman was the only in his family to continue his father's legacy of service.

After graduating high school Mr Heyman enlisted on June 21st 1974, moving from Southern California to San Antonio, Texas for Air Force Basic Training that summer. The first question I asked, as a lifelong Californian, was how he dealt with the weather, and Mr Heyman didn't mix words: "It was the hottest summer of my life," he chuckled, later telling me, "1974 was the hottest summer on record." After six weeks of basic training, he moved to fire training academy at Chanute AFB in Rantoul, Illinois. The base, not too far outside of Champaign-Urbana Illinois, taught Mr. Heyman the complexities of fighting jet fuel based fires. Whether it be from learning the specifics of firefighting foam or using mock ups, the pride Mr. Heyman had in his eyes, when describing the nitty gritty of firefighting was something you couldn't ignore. It was clear from these stories, Mr. Heyman loved his job and training dearly. One anecdote that had us both mesmerized was his mock-up training. He set the scene to a mock up of a B-52 bomber set ablaze, and he explained how terrifying but also somewhat exciting it was for a 19 year old kid from California to pull out a faux-pilot from an almost real B-52 bomber, all on fire. "Training was meant to

determine who would and wouldn't lose their head [in a real life situation]," he said. Luckily for Mr Heyman, he passed with flying colors and graduated on time. He would return to Rantoul numerous times throughout his career to continue and advance his training.

After finishing fire-fighter training in Rantoul, like all Air Force personnel, he got the option to list his top three assignments preferences. I tried guessing which ones he had asked for, but to my surprise, none of the ones I guessed were on his list. He told me, "I listed Southeast Asia, among one of my options." At the time the Vietnam War was beginning to wind-down, and he told me he wanted to serve his nation in-country. Despite his desires for the frontlines, the Air Force had other ideas, locating him far from the jungles of Vietnam to Mather Air Force Base near Sacramento, California.

Arriving in Sacramento later that year, his unit supported the KC-135 refuelers and B-52 bombers with the 320th Bomb Wing of the Strategic Air Command during the height of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. At this point of the interview he pulled out a photo from a newspaper that showed the brevity of the aircraft. The black and white image of the B-52 showed its eight engines, massive fuselage and nearly 18 wheels. As he gave me the image to inspect, he noted how at Mather these airplanes carried payloads that included nuclear weapons. He noted how when these airplanes would take off, as a firefighter, he had to wait at the end of the runway in case anything happened. It was here where he lost his hearing due to consistent exposure, and it was here where I had started to be amazed at just how positive and prideful Mr. Heyman could be despite any hardships he might have faced. Despite his hardships or fears, an overwhelming sense of pride became evident in his tone or even just his smile. That continued sense of pride was something he maintained throughout our interview, and was implied throughout his time served.

After spending nearly 4 years in a supporting role at Mather, he would be honorably discharged in 1978. Post-military he went into commercial firefighting ventures ranging from Northrop Grumman to Lockheed Martin to eventually becoming the fire marshal at the University of California, San Diego. He would happily retire from that post after nearly 40 years of service as a firefighter.

In retirement, Mr. Heyman continues to work to protect the interests of Vietnam Veterans across the country. As Chair of Government Affairs with the California State Council of Vietnam Veterans of America he has lobbied both congressional and state legislatures on behalf of the interests of Vietnam and all veterans alike. One notable example was when he told me about the legislation he recently helped pass that ensures veterans are not subject to claim sharks to cash their VA benefits. In addition to

protecting the interests of Vietnam Veterans something that was touching was his service towards helping his father. As I mentioned before, when he was younger his father worked long hours, so catching up with him was something he rarely did. Being able to support him in his later years, especially after his father received a dementia diagnosis, showed me simply how generous he was. That was the spirit I got from Mr. Heyman, that regardless of rank or of title, he was so generous to his community and for those who he cared for.

If I learned anything from the precious time I got to spend with Mr. Heyman is that there are so many stories and people who experienced the war than I originally knew about. Before this interview, I knew of stories at the frontlines, but those were all I knew. So often when we think of Vietnam we think of only the frontlines, and we don't think about the supporters. Whether that be the families of those on the frontline or those like Mr Heyman who were firefighters, the effort in Vietnam took a village, and that is oftentimes not looked at. This interview let me see everyone who helped this effort, and it left me seeing Vietnam in a fuller picture: one that includes the details of Mr. Heyman's which are of such joy and ones that include the details of other soldiers who had to endure such pain. I am so grateful Mr. Heyman let me see this picture, and I am so grateful for the Vietnam Veterans whose legacy keeps our nation safe.

On a personal note, doing this report, and meeting with Mr. Heyman meant so much to me. My grandfather served as a pointman in Vietnam but unfortunately passed when my mom was young due to a heart attack after the war. My grandfather, for me, is always remembered as a man of good spirit, and a man of honorable service. I never got to meet him, but in this interview I was lucky enough to meet someone who served at the same time as him, and frankly, someone who held his same spirit. Whether it was just watching Mr Heyman make jokes of the most tense of times, or his sheer kindness in time to me and the others in the restaurant, I didn't just meet a veteran that day, I met a man of wide breadth and outstanding character. When I told him about my grandfather, he posthumously gave a patch and pin in honor of my grandfather to my family. In the moment I myself was trying hard not to cry. When I showed it to my mother she herself could not express the gratitude and solitude that our family was able to get not just from the gift, but from the time I was able to spend with Mr. Heyman.

Thank you again to Mr. Heyman for his time, and with the utmost sincerity, thank you for your service to our country.