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My grandfather, Mark Erickson, stands tall and stoic at 80 years old - the archetype of a midwestern farmer of Swedish and German descent. These days he lives in rural Iowa, collects antique tractors, flies his own 4-seater airplane, and volunteers at events for the Air Force Historic Society. He has two kids and five grandkids who he visits often. He's also a Vietnam War veteran. He served in the Air Force in Cameron Bay, in the 457 Attack Air Lift Squadron from August 1969 - August 1970. He rarely speaks about it- I've heard more from my mother than I ever did from him. So, I was intrigued to hear what he had to say about the war when I interviewed him.

From my mom I knew that he had enlisted because he wanted to serve his country. He went on to stay in the Air Force for 20 years in total. The first thing he mentions in our interview is the friends he lost - seven total, including a roommate, and one of whom I later found out was a father of three little girls. I had heard briefly about these losses, had seen him stand up to hold candles for friends lost in the war before at a Veterans ceremony we attended as a family, but still I was surprised by the emotion in his voice as he said, "That still sticks with ya." It doesn't sound like much to an outside reader, but for my stoic grandfather, the simplicity of that statement and thickness in his voice said enough. It sticks with him. It always will.

The emotion continues as I ask him about leaving his family. My mother was only three years old at the time, my uncle a baby of nine months. He tears up as he describes my mother calling "Daddy!" to him at the airport upon his return, my uncle not recognizing him at first. I had never seen him cry before, and didn't know how to react. There's a hint of fierceness in his voice as he swears he's never leaving his family like that again. Later, I described this to my mother, and she tears up a bit as well, full of memories from her childhood. She describes how her mother played her audiotapes of him so she wouldn't forget his voice, and had her and her brother kiss a picture of him each night so they wouldn't forget his face (this was long before Facetime!) She explains how she often wondered how that impacted their bonding with him - she isn't sure her father and her brother's relationship recovered until her brother was in his twenties, as they had sometimes had a tumultuous relationship when he was young. It's clear none of them will ever quite forget what it was like when he was gone, despite it being fifty years ago now. And how can they?

Beyond just the emotional impact of the war, I ask him about his views on the war now, and the politics of it all. I knew the war was controversial, even for soldiers serving in it, but was still a bit surprised by the anger in his voice. He describes his frustration at finding out later what the government had hid from the forces and the American public and the way the work they were doing began to feel useless. He describes a friend of his who identified a pallet while flying it somewhere, then noticed later he was flying the same pallet back to its original location. My grandfather doesn't know if he was doing the same pointless work, but finds it likely. This pales in comparison, however, to the days when they flew in fresh soldiers and flew out with body bags. He witnessed firsthand the loss of life, the devastation the war created for thousands of

young men. To me, he sounds almost like a modern Charon, ferrying the souls of the lost to the Underworld. Except instead of souls, he only carried body bags.

Towards the end of the interview, we delve into the situation in Ukraine, as our conversation took place just two days after Russia began its invasion. My grandfather and I don't always agree on politics, but here we are united - Putin is a villain and this shouldn't be happening. During this segment of our conversation, he says something that sums up my biggest takeaway from my interview with him- "Most of us (Vietnam veterans) in the long run wish that humans could find a better way of solving things than killing each other, but I don't know if we ever will." I couldn't agree more with this, especially after hearing firsthand his account of his time in Vietnam. I have always been antiviolence, and for that reason always opposed war. But at the same time, there's not always a better option. We can see this so clearly with the modern Ukraine situation- no one wants the US and Europe drawn into what could become a nuclear disaster of a war with Russia, but we are quickly running out of other options. We keep imposing sanctions and trying diplomatic avenues, but Putin keeps advancing and civilian death tolls rise every day. At what point is violence necessary? Now? Never?

I still don't know the answer, and neither does anyone else. But as we go into the future and decide, we have to hear the voices of the past like my grandfather's, and face the devastating toll war has on those who fight in it. Because war means more young people like my grandfather was, with children like my grandfather had, will have to leave. And some, like his friend, will never come home. And we have to ensure that this doesn't become a fruitless war, with soldiers doing busywork and the government hiding their abuses. My grandfather is a living example of what means and what war can become, and especially now we can't afford to forget and ignore his and other veterans' voices.