

My name is Ben Tittle, and this is my essay for the Vietnam Veterans of America scholarship. The veteran I interviewed is my maternal grandfather, Lieutenant Commander Ronald J. Wills, United States Navy. Born and raised in Wilmington, Delaware, he was born on December 10, 1941 and graduated from the United States Naval Academy in 1963. After that, he was on active duty from June 6, 1963 until January 23, 1969. Upon completing training in Coronado, California (which included Vietnamese language lessons and SERE (Survival, Evasion Resistance, and Escape) training), he served on a number of ships including the USS *Norris*, the USS *Massey*, and the USS *Warrington*. He also served on a patrol boat called PGM 614 when he was ordered to Naval Advisory Group RVN in 1968. He described this tour, the second of two tours to Vietnam he served, as “90% boredom, 10% activity”. His duties included advising on operations, training, logistics, and communications. Overall, he served 161 days of combat patrols, mostly in coastal and river areas. He and his team of South Vietnamese marines searched junks for weapons or Viet Cong fighters (they didn’t find anybody, much to my surprise when I heard about it). One of the most notable experiences he had was when his boat went from the island of Phu Quoc to Ha Tien, on the mainland close to the Vietnam-Cambodia border. His boat ran aground due to the tide falling, and for a few hours, they were stuck with Viet Cong patrols overlooking them and within sight on a nearby hill. After that, the tide rose, and they were able to get the supplies they had been requested to get. That was the one time he saw the enemy face-to-face. But it wasn’t all gloom and doom. One of the more light-hearted moments was when he and his team stopped for some beer. It was warm, so he was scared to drink it in fear of waterborne disease, food poisoning, or other illness. His Vietnamese friend Long took

the glass and washed it in the water before proclaiming it was safe to drink, so he drank it. Lo and behold, he didn't get sick. He also learned some Vietnamese phrases like "ba mui lam" which means "dirty old man". Long made it out one day before the Fall of Saigon, but tragically, his friend Pham Tien Cuong did not. Another story from his service was when a boiler technician he knew had too much beer, vomited in his sleep because he was drunk, and choked to death from it. After that tragic and unfortunate incident, my grandfather and the other officers were given a very stern talking-to from the commodore.

For his service in Vietnam, Ronald Wills was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V" device. After his service in Vietnam, he attended graduate school at the University of Delaware to get a master's degree in engineering, where he was harassed and called a "baby killer" by other students who were opposed to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, my family housed a Vietnamese refugee family for a time. However, for a long time, he seldom spoke about his experience in Vietnam, including to his kids, my mother and maternal uncle. As a matter of fact, this interview is the most he's ever opened up to me about his experience in Vietnam, at least as far as I can remember. Years later, in 2011, he contracted lymphoma, which the doctor said was "highly likely" caused by agent orange exposure. Luckily, the treatment he receives is very good. He now lives with his wife and my maternal grandmother, Deana Wills, in San Diego, California.

I really learned a lot from this interview. It illustrated to me a conflict that, with the passing of the generation that lived through it, is unfortunately

fading away into a distant memory fast. With that, we need to do our part in ensuring that the memory of the Vietnam War and the men who served and died in it will never be forgotten. I also learned that, far from the action-packed Hollywood movies like *We Were Soldiers*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Apocalypse Now*, a large part of the Vietnam War was monotonous things like patrols and life away from the front lines. The interview really illustrated the importance of action and support efforts behind the front lines. Above that, I was reminded of how the Vietnam War still affects America today, from the veterans suffering from agent orange-related cancers, to how we view US involvement in the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The War in Vietnam has taught us valuable lessons, like the legitimacy of intervention, acknowledgement of the human side of warfare, considering human cost, preparedness for asymmetric warfare, and warning of overreliance on military power.

Overall, the Vietnam War is very much a defining chapter in American history, and a chapter we must work hard to remember. Ever since then, my family, including myself, has taken part in veterans events and other veterans-related activities. The story of my grandfather Ronald Wills' experience in Vietnam has taught me the importance of resilience under pressure and courage even in the bleakest of times. It has also taught me the importance of listening to and researching not only the known history of a conflict or event, but also to the personal experiences of people who lived through them. Most of all, perhaps, this experience has reminded me of the importance of caring for our veterans, men and women who have given up so much for our country, up to and including their own lives. I'm proud to come from a family with a lot of veterans, including Ronald Wills. I hope

that their stories, along with the stories of all other veterans, will be preserved for generations to come, and that those stories will continue to teach and inspire people. I would like to thank the South Bay chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America for offering this scholarship, both to myself and to anyone else who has both previously and will in the future receive this scholarship.