

Vietnam Veteran Scholarship Application 2024 - Jackson Mancilla

Every neighborhood has its unsung hero— a rare soul who has done so much for their family, friends, community, or country. These standout individuals have done more for us than we give them credit for, but we are often never fortunate enough to hear their stories firsthand, and in turn, they are often never fortunate enough to receive the praise they deserve.

My neighbor, Kirk Gillett, is one of these unsung heroes. Kirk has been a friend to the family for as long as we can remember, and I can say with confidence that he is one of the kindest men I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. His devotion to his community has always been directly illustrated by his neighborly nature, if anybody around him needs help, he has been, and always will be there to help, whether it requires him to be a handyman, electrician, or even just someone to talk to. Kirk's service to others and abundance of useful skills can only be contextualized by his deployment within the Navy from 1970 to 1971. Upon receiving his draft notice in 1968, Kirk enlisted himself and was promptly placed within the Seabees— the unit within the navy that handles construction and defense. He served within this mobile construction unit in the fifth battalion for over a year, returning home after turning 21, and eventually returning to Vietnam shortly before turning 22.

Kirk recalled his first day touching down in Danang: The cramped and sweaty 20 hour plane ride where each soldier sat, sweltering in their own body heat and anxiety. Nobody knew what to expect when the doors of the aircraft opened, all they could do was wait. When those massive iron doors finally opened, letting in the disgustingly damp humidity and bright sunlight of tropical Vietnam, Kirk described the sensory overload that slapped him in the face the second that he stepped out from the airplane hangar; the heat on his skin, the thundering booms in the distance, the air that had a certain distinct 'thickness' to it; it was as if the atmosphere itself had become water. The tiny pamphlets of paper that had been passed out to each soldier during the plane ride wilted in the incredible humidity; the unbelievable heat that beat down on everyone's back like they had just stepped out of a plane and into an oven. They were surrounded by jungle on all sides, with the exception of a river behind them close to where he would be stationed for much of his deployment as a Seabee. In the distance, he described hearing the sound of thousands of thunderbolts smiting whatever unlucky targets lie beyond, in reality— this terrible noise was artillery fire. In his concerned state, he addressed the noise, calling out to his nearest officer, asking if it was outgoing or incoming fire, to which the response was "when it's incoming fire, trust me, you'll know it."

Kirk's introduction to Vietnam somewhat encapsulates the general feel of his stay within the country. The entire time he was stationed along the Mekong delta he made memories both positive and negative. Befriending fellow seabees and ARVNs— local Vietnamese soldiers who fought alongside the US— he can recall many fond moments where he connected and spoke with many of these brave souls. Now, of course, none of these people wanted to be there in that dank

jungle, but rather they were all there out of necessity. It didn't matter how much Kirk had in common with these comrades of his, because they were already bonded by their drive to protect liberty and save the lives of the innocent. Nobody wanted to be at war, but they had to put in an effort to protect what they could. War is hell after all, and let that fact validate the bravery of each of these soldiers like Kirk who marched headfirst into this great big, bloody battle in order to protect what was right. All-in-all Kirk said it best— nobody could pay him enough money to go back, but if the war were still going on and he was still out there, nobody could pay him enough to *come* back to America until his duty was complete. As a soldier, Kirk and his fellow seabees had an obligation to protect and serve. They were not willing to stop until somebody physically stopped them, which was why when he had to return home from deployment for the second time, he felt a sense of dread that he couldn't see his duty through. This feeling appeared towards the end of the war when he was ultimately done with his duty, and when Saigon fell. It hit him like a ton of bricks— the notion that all his hard work and the work of his fellow soldiers was for naught. Despite the loss that the United States took, Kirk looks back on his time as a soldier with a distinct feeling of assuredness. From the friends he made to the fact that he made a difference and saved the lives of innocent civilians, he wouldn't change a thing about his past.

Within the Navy, along with all other Branches of the military, there's a certain sense of camaraderie between a soldier and his friends. Kirk recalls befriending both locals and fellow Seabees during his time working, and these connections he made were some of his fondest memories, but this sense of camaraderie was fleeting— as— when he returned home to America after his second period of deployment, he was met with... nothing.

Nobody seemed to care at all that he had just gone to hell and back, and it wasn't just to protect the Vietnamese people. The implications of the Vietnamese war were to protect the entire world from tyranny; Kirk enlisted for this reason. He bravely sent himself out not to protect his own future, but to protect the future of all citizens both Vietnamese and American— and yet, arguably the most gut-wrenching part of all of it was that it seemed everybody back in America could care less. And if it weren't just for the fact that this lack of appreciation was frustrating— to say the least— the general American public was relatively naive in regards to the subject of the war at the time. And this issue still holds true today; Kirk's story holds testament to the fact that appreciating and understanding veterans holds two distinctly imperative roles: The necessity to understand the *need* to uphold liberty and protect peace, and our obligation as civilians to show gratitude for the people who actively do this for us.

This interview was so satisfying purely because I was finally able to do just that: Fully appreciate the work that this staple of my community and my life for all these years had done for both me and my country. Far too frequently unsung heroes have been left unappreciated and unnoticed, but in times like these, when we can finally understand why we have it so good, it's truly eye-opening to see that we have people like Veteran Seabee Kirk Gillett to thank.