

Biography

Thomas Quintana joined the Air Force in 1966 and served one year in the Vietnam War from 1968 to 1969. Realizing that he had a low draft number and wanted to avoid getting assigned to the Marine Corps, Quintana himself opted to join the Air Force. His basic training was in San Antonio, Texas, and was supposed to be 16 weeks. However, as the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War intensified and the need for active-duty members grew, the training period was compressed to just 4 weeks. Assigned as an Air Operations Specialist at George Air Force Base, Quintana was forced to quickly adapt to the rigors of military life amidst the escalating involvement in Vietnam.

In 1968, Quintana was deployed to Vietnam, stationed at Phan Rang Air Base, located approximately 100 miles from Saigon. His role as a squadron operation officer involved meticulous scheduling and maintaining military records to improve the operational efficiency of the unit. Despite his base's proximity to hostile territories, Quintana actively sought to experience more of the country. On his days off, he volunteered as an additional crew member, a duty that allowed him to explore the country and capture its sights through photography. During this period of service, however, he began to see the flaws in the military operation, particularly in leadership deficiency and the disconnect between strategic planning and frontline realities, making him begin to doubt his career aspirations in the Air Force.

While working as the squadron operation officer, he made many friends. They were always there for him through thick and thin, allowing him to get through the rough days in the military. One day while working, an operation officer came in and told him that an aircraft was down—and just like that, the lives of friends were gone in the blink of an eye. Just that morning, he had casually exchanged greetings with the now fallen comrade, never anticipating that it would be their last interaction.

Quintana ended up naming his son, Neil, after the fallen pilot, a reminder of the sacrifices made by those who serve. As he first held his newborn son in his arm, Quintana recounts feeling a deep sense of respect for the legacy he was honoring-- a legacy of courage and dedication to duty.

One particular moment from my interview with Quintana resonated with me deeply. We were discussing the challenges he faced during his service in Vietnam, and his voice grew quite as he said, "The thing that kept me going, through the fear, the uncertainty, everything... it was holding onto my morals, keeping them strong and straight". His

gazed drifted to a distant point, and I could sense the weight of his memories. Wanting to know more, I pressed further.

Quintana explained that witnessing the realities of war—the devastation, the moral gray areas—could easily chip away at a person’s right and wrong. He described a close call when he was pressured to participate in an operation that he felt was ethically wrong. Refusing to put him at odds with his superiors but Quintana held firm. “That day”, he mentioned, “I realized that even in the face of authority, even when the fear is coming at you, you got to hold that line. Your morals, your compass—that's what puts you to sleep at night, knowing you did the right thing”.

This realization extends beyond the battlefield. This world is filled with ethical dilemmas and moral ambiguity. I have definitely experienced situations where the “right” answer isn’t readily apparent, where personal gain might conflict with what is morally sound, or where social pressure pushes me in a direction,, I do not want to go in. Rather than taking a shortcut or conforming to the expectations of others, I promised Quintana that I will staying true to myself and navigate my own moral compass. Quintana’s reply resonated with me even further. He stated that by doing so, not only do we build self-respect, but we become living examples for others, fostering a society where ethical behavior is valued.

I believe that the phrase “freedom is not free” holds a truth that often becomes more evident after engaging with the stories and experiences of those who have served in the military. Through my interview, I’ve come to realize the depth of meaning behind those words. While I have much to learn, I am beginning to understand the inherent cost of preserving freedom that I too often take for granted. The direct cost comes in forms not limited to rigorous training, present threat of danger, and mental and physical tolls. In addition, there are also silent costs, costs borne by the families of those who serve. Quintana talked about his family back home, how worried they were while he was gone. The prolonged separations, the constant uncertainty during deployment, and the challenges of maintaining stability in the absence of a loved one are just a few to mention.

It’s humbling to realize that I have been enjoying the privilege of living in a free society, where I can obtain education and pursue my dreams, without having to worry about the threat of war. I now believe that it’s a responsibility, not just to appreciate these freedoms, but to understand the cost borne and strive to be worthy of this priceless gift.

Before interviewing Thomas Quintana, I was honestly unfamiliar with the military and their service. Of course, I knew they existed, but I lacked a personal connection, as none of my family or friends that I know served. Veterans Day, for me, was primarily associated with an extra day off from school that I enjoyed. Sure, there were parades and speeches, but it never clicked what it meant. However, my conversation with Quintana was

a transformative experience. It wasn't necessarily about gathering biographical details; it was about personally connecting with a veteran and hearing a firsthand perspective on military service.

Now, Veterans Day holds a completely different significance for me. It's no longer a day where I can sleep in and hang out with my friends, it's a day of immense respect and gratitude. It's a day to acknowledge the veterans who have dedicated their lives to defending our nation, and its impacts on veteran's lives, both during and after their time in the military.

To all those who are currently serving or have served in the past, as well as their families, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude.

Thank you for your service.