

Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53 Scholarship Essay Submission

Nowadays, most people know David O. Carter as “Your Honor,” a United States District Judge for the Central District of California, appointed by Bill Clinton in 1998 and well known for a variety of court decisions. However, just over 50 years ago, around 60 young men he calls his “kids” knew him as Lieutenant. In the United States Marine Corps, Carter was a part of the First Battalion 9th Marine Regiment 3rd Marine Division Charlie Company First Platoon and was in service from around March 1967 to August 1969 when he was medically discharged.

Carter always expected to eventually end up in the military. His grandfathers, stepfather, and father all served at some point, and he saw “fighting communism” and “joining the military” as a duty he owed his country and something that would make him feel proud. When studying at UCLA, one of Carter’s best friends was killed in Vietnam, which gave him a “new sense of reality” and brought him to begin to register for the Marine Corps in December of 1966. Motivated and proud, the only person he had to convince was his mother.

Only half of his group of around 800 people made it past the 10-week period in Quantico that was intended to produce a pool of men equipped for war. After that, those 400 men began a 4 and a half month intensive training period, learning everything from war tactics to how to shoot a machine gun. Carter said there was “nothing easy” about this process, but he was motivated and ready to be sent to combat.

After finishing training and after being sent to UC Irvine to recruit for about a week, Carter arrived to combat on Christmas Eve of 1967. His first stop was Okinawa, where he was immediately started by a mongoose fighting a cobra – the anticipation of months of training began to turn into a new level of understanding of how seriously dangerous this moment was. At the airport, the commander who gave him his assignment told him his battalion was “the Walking Dead” and with “a striking sense of reality that he might not survive,” he felt “proud, ready, and anxious.” He was thankful for his life insurance policy, which he expected to go to his two little cousins within a few months.

Carter put the platoon he oversaw into 3 groups, with around $\frac{1}{3}$ of them heading to Way City, $\frac{1}{3}$ heading to PK 19, and $\frac{1}{3}$ staying at Camp Evans. However, on January 21st, less than a month after Carter arrived, the battle at Khe Sanh began, and Carter and his men were quickly sent in as reinforcements. As the most heavily bombed troops in a square mile radius in the history of America, they immediately began building trenches with their hands upon touching down. From late January to early April, he and his soldiers often had to choose between hiding in

underground holes that could either suffocate or cave in on them and staying closer to ground level, which would risk being hit by the Northern Vietnamese artillery.

On April 4th, after 77 days of holding the trenches, he and his squad were the ones called to break out of the siege first, heading North 1 mile and South 3 miles. Carter described this day to be “exhilarating;” knowing the fact that “over 3,000 people had been butchered” and that the North Vietnamese had decimated civilians in Way City that his men had grown to care for and love only made them more ready to leave the trenches.

12 days later, on April 16, 1968, Carter left Vietnam due to a wound in his right arm that was the result of a human wave attack. The day he was injured, 17 of his 60 kids were killed or wounded, and nowadays there are varying reports as to how many of his men made it out alive and healthy; in the hospital, he was told only 8.

After 8 months of rehabilitation, Carter enrolled in UCLA Law School, where not only did he learn to practice law but also relearn how to use a pencil (due to the severity of his injury). While he lived and continues to grapple with immense feelings of guilt and used to experience severe aimlessness and reckless desperation after losing so many of his “kids,” Carter remains “endlessly proud” of those who fought beside him and said “time and distance” was what helped him get to a better place. At a certain point, he “stopped trying to sort it out,” because you “make a choice to die in place or move forward.” Each time he hears about a kid of his who remained alive, his heart “lifts a bit” and he never regrets the sacrifice he made to “know you’re in charge of kids who will definitely die.”

He is still in close contact with a few of his “kids” and was very involved with helping them reach better places as well. He is also still active in veteran affairs. He told me on April 9th he was scaling a mountain with fellow veterans in remembrance of those they lost.

I first learned about the Vietnam War in a quick PowerPoint presentation that took up roughly 45 minutes of class time in my AP US History class. The purpose was to provide me with the facts about the war needed to pass the test, and thus, my understanding of the war severely lacked nuance and complexity. My conversation with Judge Carter was an incredibly important reminder that history is more than right and wrong, more than dates, key figures, and turning points; history is a never-ending, everflowing narration of mankind, told through the real-life experiences of real people. Judge Carter’s story personalized and humanized the Vietnam War for me in a way I’ve never seen before. As I told him after our conversation, I believe that real conversation with those who hold different convictions, perspectives, or experiences than our

own is the key to my generation's success. Only in conversations like these do we realize how, at our core, we're way more similar than we sometimes care to admit.

When we look back on history, it can be very to easy to look at it through a contemporary political or moral lens and make broad generalizations. For example, because many people agree nowadays that the Vietnam War lacked transparent, good intentions on the part of the American government, some may discredit or undervalue the contributions that soldiers made to that war. Conversely, some may feel that those who dodged the war disgraced this country and are unworthy of reaping its privileges. However, an important lesson Judge Carter taught me was that all anyone is ever doing is what they believe to be best for them, so all you can do is treat them with compassion and empathy. Carter said he was disappointed by anti-war demonstrators who condemned soldiers or disrespected their sacrifice, but he was never offended by those who protested or questioned the viability of the war. He said he would now love to “hug” and “talk with” anyone who dodged the war and he is incapable of judging their decision. Carter called “the decision to fight when nobody else would” the most noble and patriotic act he could ever do, and reminded me that each person who makes the selfless sacrifice to join the armed forces is deserving of respect, regardless of the politics or intentions of their leader.

Similarly, he said that if he were to meet anyone his age who fought for the North Vietnamese, he would hug them as well, even though they were trying to kill each other half a century ago. Beyond their different uniforms, he recognizes that they were all just trying to fight for what they believed to be right in the only way they knew how, which is a striking reminder that borders and language barriers and politics will never diminish or trump how collectively and inherently similar we all are. I don't think anyone can comprehend and embody empathy as well as veterans like Carter do.

Carter also encouraged me to recognize that “the poor and the disenfranchised were the ones who fought this war.” While the elite were turning the war into intellectual conversation topics on philosophy, politics, and morality, it was “the rednecks from Kansas” and “the gangbangers from Chicago” in a trench with him in Vietnam, fighting for the upholding of the ideals this country was founded upon. Throughout their time in combat, this diverse group of men was relentlessly and enduringly reminded “they all bleed red.” It was this spilling of blood and united hard work – not a textbook or a lecture – that taught Carter about equality.