

AJ Waldfogel - RUHS - Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53

I am honored to share the remarkable story of my grandfather, Alan Waldfogel, whose life has been one of resilience, service, and unwavering strength. His journey is not only a testament to dedication and perseverance, but also a guiding force in shaping the person I strive to become. Through both his accomplishments and his hardships, he has shown me what it truly means to lead with courage and to serve something greater than oneself.

My grandfather served with distinction in the United States Air Force for over 30 years, dedicating his life to protecting his country during some of the most pivotal moments in modern history, including the Vietnam War, the Panama Invasion, and Desert Storm. His work as a mechanical engineer was not just technical—it was essential. He played a critical role in designing and configuring C131 cargo planes, ensuring they could operate efficiently and safely in high-stakes environments. Even more impressively, he was involved in the complex and dangerous process of refueling fighter jets mid-air during combat. This task required not only precision and intelligence, but also immense bravery, as even the smallest mistake could have life-threatening consequences.

While these accomplishments are extraordinary on their own, what makes my grandfather's story even more powerful is where it began. He was raised as the child of Holocaust survivors, growing up in the shadow of unimaginable loss and trauma. Yet instead of allowing that history to define him with fear, he transformed it into a source of strength. From a young age, he understood the importance of perseverance, hard work, and finding purpose in adversity. His life represents the idea that even the darkest beginnings can lead to meaningful and impactful futures. After retiring from the Air Force, my grandfather did not slow down. Instead, he transitioned into civilian engineering, continuing to innovate and contribute to society. He worked for companies like Gillette, where he helped design products such as the Gillette Schick razor—items that people use every day without realizing the thought and engineering behind them. This phase of his life showed me that service doesn't end when a career does; it simply evolves into new forms. Whether serving his country or improving everyday life for others, he has always been driven by a desire to contribute.

However, what inspires me most about my grandfather is not just what he has done, but how he has faced the challenges life has placed in front of him. Even as he battles cancer, lives with diabetes, and has undergone a kidney transplant, he continues to approach each day with resilience and determination. He does not let his circumstances define his attitude or limit his spirit. Instead, he remains optimistic, strong, and deeply committed to his family. Watching him navigate these obstacles has taught me that true strength is not about avoiding hardship, but about facing it head-on with courage and grace. Because of his influence, I have learned that leadership is not about recognition or titles—it is about action, empathy, and the willingness to put others before yourself. Motivated by his example, I have dedicated myself to serving my community. Over the past few years, I have accumulated more than 170 volunteer hours with South Bay organizations that support individuals with special abilities, those who have experienced trauma, and those facing displacement. Through this work, I have seen firsthand how small acts of kindness and support can make a significant difference in someone's life. It has reinforced the idea that leadership is rooted in compassion and the ability to connect with others on a human level. My grandfather has also taught me the importance of building genuine relationships and earning trust. He believes that respect is not given automatically—it is earned through consistency, integrity, and care for others. I have carried this lesson into every aspect of my life, especially in my role as the starting center on the RUHS Varsity Water Polo team. On the team, I was known as a cultural leader, not because of a title, but because of my ability to bring people together. Whether it was resolving conflicts, encouraging teammates, or creating a positive environment, I worked to ensure that everyone felt valued and united toward a common goal. This experience showed me that leadership is about uplifting others and creating a sense of belonging.

In many ways, my grandfather's life has shaped my understanding of what it means to serve. Service is not limited to one career or one moment—it is a lifelong commitment to making a difference, no matter how big or small. His example pushes me to step outside of my comfort zone, to face challenges without fear, and to always consider how my actions can impact others. It reminds me that resilience is not something you are born with, but something you build through experience, determination, and perspective. As I look toward my future, I carry his lessons with me. I strive to approach every opportunity with the same dedication and purpose that he has demonstrated throughout his life. I want to continue serving my community, building meaningful connections, and leading with both strength and compassion. Most importantly, I want to honor his legacy by becoming someone who not only overcomes challenges, but uses those challenges as a foundation for growth and service.

My grandfather's story is more than just a personal history—it is a blueprint for how to live with intention, resilience, and integrity. I am incredibly grateful for the lessons he continues to teach me about strength, sacrifice, and what it truly means to serve others. His life reminds me that no matter where you come from or what obstacles you face, you have the power to create a meaningful impact. Thank you for allowing me to share his journey and the lasting influence it has had on my life.