

Cristina Couch

RUHS Student

### **Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53 Scholarship Essay**

"Four generations of army soldiers"— a phrase echoed throughout the halls of my home, parading dinner tables and casual conversation. As a kid, the significance of those words meant little. My father didn't repeat the phrase to pressure us, but rather to help us understand our family. Little me saw the phrase as merely a comedic attempt to recruit my siblings into the army.

"I'm only ten," I'd say to my father. He'd smile and respond:

"Well someone's got to keep the line going."

"Good thing you have three kids," I said.

My perceptions of the phrase changed after hearing my grandfather's story.

My grandfather, Correll Couch, joined the army on January 6th 1966. He trained in Oklahoma at Fort Sill, and Alabama at Fort Rucker—now called Fort Novosel. After completing flight school, he enlisted in the war and served in Vietnam from January 1968, at the height of the war, until February 1969. There, he served as an artillery officer, in the 20th Aerial Rocket Artillery of the First Air Cavalry Division. After his tour, he completed graduate school and became a dentist. He totaled 26 years of service, 5 years of active duty and 21 years in the reserve as a test pilot and California National Guard after Vietnam.

From a young age I heard of the Vietnam war and tried to learn more about it. Reading about the Vietnam war was informative. Watching movies depicting a soldier's experience was eye opening, but still, the perspective of the people who served felt absent. Even then, it was easy to separate yourself from the person serving simply because you're not them. I couldn't imagine that large scale amount of violence or the idea of not knowing if you were going to make it home. Hearing my grandfather talk about it, however, was the closest I'd ever been to understanding it.

The interview wasn't an easy conversation, but it was beautiful. Through our tears, laughs, and the occasional brief silence, my perspective changed. He was twenty (20) years old when he was shipped off, not much older than myself. As I'm readying myself for college, he was preparing for war. From that interview, I realized the importance of sharing stories. He told me, "if the American people had seen a B52 bomber strike go they would want to stop that war pretty fast, because it turned a 300 foot triple canopy jungle into dust. There's nothing left except craters." If I read about the destruction within the Vietnam war from an article, I wouldn't be able to hear the impact his service had on the fluctuation of his voice when he talked about it. In that quote alone, he paused after each sentence. He said my name in between "dust" and "there's" like he was in the process of fathoming what he was saying, like he was trying to convince me it happened because he couldn't believe it himself. Minute details like that reveal the irreplicable vulnerability and intimacy of sharing a story.

Additionally stories span beyond facts, highlighting the human behind the experiences they tell. For example, my grandfather started his tour on January 6, 1968. Fact. He was inspired by a time magazine article to enlist. That's a story. One where the details offer an opportunity to understand the person telling them just a bit better. My grandfather came from a bad family situation. He started college at 17 and felt he wasn't doing anything but "screwing around." Then he saw that article. He read about how a special forces camp had been overrun by the Vietcong.

The troops organized the South Vietnam people to defend themselves and their villages from the communists. Their nobleness inspired him to become a special forces medic. Only by listening could I learn what my grandfather was feeling.

Another fact? He never became a special forces medic. A story? My grandfather could fly helicopters, but had never flown at all until he went into the military. The plane from Los Angeles to Texas to begin basic training was my grandfather's first flight. He'd never used a gun before so he couldn't hit anything. He scored well on aptitude tests, however, and at the end of training they sent him to artillery officer training at Oklahoma. He ended training at the top of his class and went to fight school and grew to love flying.

Stories allow for reflection. A person can look back on the experience differently. Sometimes with regret, nostalgia, or something in between. They can put the pieces together, rearrange them, and destroy them as they attempt to share. My grandfather is no exception. Reflecting back on his service he had no regrets. He didn't serve for America or himself or the people back at home. He strapped a helicopter to his back because no one else would. He fought to protect the 18 and 19-year-old young men who didn't ask to be there.

Stories also reveal character. Here are some things I know about my grandfather: He is an exceptional cook. He loves watching all kinds of sports games from basketball to Formula one racing. He's always making jokes. He is also incredibly supportive and loving. Hearing his story in Vietnam only reaffirmed that. Even as he progressed throughout the military, rising in rank and position, or when he returned home to a different type of hostile environment, being spit on and disrespected, he remained empathic. Those who thought little of him for his service, harboured judgment deprived from a lack of care or concern. They didn't want to know the story of the soldier who made it out. They didn't want to know the story besides the one they had accepted. My grandfather cared. He understood the value of the opportunity he'd been given and the disparity between him and non-white male individuals serving their country. He continues to live with empathy.

Hearing my grandfather tell his story was powerful. I could feel his emotions, see his experiences, and ultimately be able to understand my grandfather's perspective and the experiences of Vietnam veterans better.