

“You guys are worth fighting for. That’s what I tell the kids when they ask me why.”

I got teary eyed as veteran Danny “Greasy” Belcher said these words to me in his thick Kentucky accent. I thought about what he went through to ensure democracy, so that I and others could have freedom. And how while he was out fighting, he thought of kids like me back home.

Greasy grew up in Bath County, Kentucky, a rural area where life was simple and he spent his time riding motorcycles. As with many men of his generation, he was drafted into the military. When I asked him if he was inducted or if it was his job, he replied with, “Oh honey, everyone was drafted during that time”. He was just 21 years old when he was drafted into the United States Army, where he served as an Infantry Sergeant in D Troop, 7th Squadron, 1st Air Cavalry Division. His responsibilities included serving as a machine gunner and an infantry squad leader. Greasy said they used M60 machine guns, M14 rifle belt fed machine guns and that each squad had one. He served from 1968 until 1969 and returned home with only six of his comrades after their deployment. As he recounted his memories of that time, I asked him about what he noticed when he first arrived. He told me about the harsh conditions of Vietnam with the heat and the fact that you could not drink enough water. The soldiers were constantly on the move, engaging in patrols and setting ambushes at night. He mentioned how they’d tie rope on his feet to go into the enemy tunnels, and he’d get yanked back up once he was done looking.

The goal was simple, “To take away the night from the enemy,” Greasy said. He added that his unit conducted 46 night ambushes, a strategy meant to maintain the upper hand over the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army forces.

When he returned home, Greasy said he was greeted with little fanfare. He recalled being flown home in clean clothes and having minimal contact with his family upon arrival. He spoke of trying to return to “normal”, but the definition of a normal life was foreign to him. His post-service life was marked by struggles with PTSD, which was not well understood at the time and often came with frequent nightmares and memories of the things he’d witnessed. Greasy said he turned to alcohol as a coping mechanism to numb the pain of what he had seen and experienced. He explained that, after his service, he believed that everyone lived in the same chaotic and brutal way that soldiers in Vietnam did. Greasy went on to work in various jobs after leaving the military, including in a factory, post office, and even transporting prisoners and serving as a private investigator.

In reflecting on his experiences, Greasy shared valuable lessons that he believed were important for future generations to understand. One of the most memorable points he made was about the futility of war. He believed that the Vietnam War was one that should never have been fought the way it was fought. He argued that the war was waged without clear goals or the will to win, and that hurt the soldiers. Further, in 1968, the enemy had been beaten, and yet the war continued, prolonged by political decisions and a lack of transparency from the government. Greasy was particularly critical of the way the war was portrayed in the media and how reporters would not print out honest and truthful news.

When I asked Greasy what the toughest part about his service in Vietnam was, he responded with a chuckle and said “surviving”. He told me about how many years later, he received a phone call from his 3rd medic that told him everyone from his group was gone, but that Greasy was one of the last guys that he knew was left. Greasy told me about how this interaction brought back the memories of the past and how he tends to forget them, not wanting to remember.

My very own grandfather, Major Albro L. Lundy Jr. was an Air Force pilot who was part of the 1st Special Operations Squadron in the Vietnam War. Greasy and I were able to connect and talk about him together, which I don’t often get to do. My grandfather’s plane was shot down and I never got to meet him. My mom was just a baby when he was killed in action and it’s hard for her to talk about. But when I was interviewing Greasy, she snuck into my room and listened and then she jumped in and asked a couple of questions herself. Meeting and getting to know Greasy gave me a taste of maybe what my Grandfather would be like and what he experienced. And maybe my Mom too, which was very special.

At the end of the interview he said, “I’m no hero, I just survived.” This statement shocked me. In my generation today, oftentimes people glorify celebrities and other famous people. They frequently forget about the men and women like Greasy that fought for us so that we can have the freedom that we often take for granted every single day. To me, the celebrities don’t come close to Greasy and his sacrifice that he made for this amazing country. I learned from this interview just how important it is to never forget. It’s not just during the pledge of allegiance, national anthem, or veteran’s day to remember, it’s every single day. It’s when I wake up and step outside to go to school to get a free education. It’s when I can freely express my thoughts and opinions to others. It’s the freedom that we often take for granted that some still don’t have in other countries. I quickly responded to Greasy with, “Well, you’re my hero, Mr. Greasy.” And he will forever be my hero, because of what he did and went through.

Every single one of those men and women who served are my hero. It was an absolute honor being able to interview Greasy and an experience that I will never forget and always remind myself of.

Thank you for your service.