

“Dad, I’ve got to go! I’m going to be late for school!”

“I know, just let me tell you a quick story first. It was back in Riverside in the 50’s. Ron Hamilton and I were in my El Camino, taking a drive to L.A. We used to go all the time even though-”

“Daddy, I’m really sorry! Tell me later! Love you, bye!” I interrupted him, but if I had let my dad finish I would have been late for school. When my father tells a story, boy, does he tell a story! He spins an intricate web of details and dialogue until I feel as if I’m there beside him, whatever the situation. He’ll be sitting down in his oversized blue armchair in our living room, and something will remind him of the time he was playing soccer in the community league. While he’s telling us the story, he’ll stand up and pretend to play, as well as give a comedic expression of surprise and pain when he realized he tore his calf muscle. There are many tales he shares from his childhood, from his adventures in Europe after his time in Vietnam, and from the years after he met my mother. His stories are usually humorous because he loves making my mom, brother, and me laugh. A somber tale from my father is rare, and I believe this is why I hardly ever hear stories from his service in Vietnam.

As I was growing up, sometimes I would ask him about the eighteen months he spent fighting for his country. My dad would reply with a short answer, or skillfully segue to a different topic. If I was persistent, I would pry information out of him, and he would try very hard to keep the mood light. He didn’t want to burden his little girl with talk of war and death. I knew that he had received a Purple Heart and an Air Medal, but those stories remained locked inside of him, no matter how many times I asked.

I am older now, and though it pains me to think about my dad being in a dangerous situation, I am so proud of him and have wanted to know more. I want everyone else to know how brave he is as well, and how brave the men he served with are. By interviewing my dad and writing this essay, I hope I am accomplishing my goal.

My father had preexisting views about the military before he was drafted, and I believe that these views made it a little easier for him to leave. His father stormed the beach at Normandy in World War II, and two of his uncles fought at Iwo Jima. All three were Marines. Growing up in a family with strong military ties taught my dad to feel great pride toward his country, and that it was important to defend it.

So, it was the pride he felt for America that kept him going when that fateful letter arrived in the mail in 1967. My dad got his affairs in order and spent the last few days before basic training seeing his home state of California one last time and talking with my grandmother. He believed in the war in Vietnam, and thought that this country was in danger, so he became a member of the U.S. Army. Writing down his actions in a few sentences is simple, but what he was feeling at the time should not try to be condensed into a sentence. He knew he might never see his home again. The uncertainty of the future, and the fear of what lay ahead were in his mind constantly. He was twenty-five, and had not done all he had wanted yet, and may not get the full life he expected. All that he could do was believe in the cause and say goodbye to his mom.

He went to basic, then to Vietnam. There his division, the 4th Infantry, was stationed in Pleiku at Camp Enari. For a few months he worked in intelligence, decoding and interpreting top-secret messages (apparently it wasn't as glamorous as it sounds). Then he heard about a job opening as a photojournalist. The previous man who did it had been killed, and no one was volunteering for the duty. Wanting to do more for the cause,

and to make it possible for the families of 4th Infantry soldiers to know new developments, my dad took the job. As a photojournalist, it was my dad's job to see everything, take pictures, and write articles about the events. He would go out on sorties with the troops in their "slicks," to see and report on whatever action they faced. On his helicopter rides, he had a camera, a pen, and a weapon. He was a reporter, yes; but he was a soldier first. He saw death in many forms, I would imagine. Though, I can't know for certain, because in the interview he glossed over this area of his job. I do know that he is glad he wrote for the men, and glad to know that their families would read his articles in newspapers back home and be informed. He felt that by doing this task he helped the families cope with having a loved one away at war.

My dad likes this quote by Charles Dickens the most, and believes it best summarizes his service in Vietnam, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." He experienced the life-long camaraderie that is a result of trusting a fellow soldier with your life. He felt the addictive adrenaline rush soldiers achieve in the heat of combat that is like nothing else. The "worst of times" occurred when deep connections were severed with a well-aimed bullet. Death was everywhere, and he witnessed much of it. It has been just over forty years since his service, yet for him I believe he sees those times as if they were yesterday. Those experiences showed him the value of life, the value of appreciating all that we are blessed with, and the value of freedom.

In those forty years, my dad has suffered the repercussions of being a soldier who served in Vietnam. The war is still with him, always. Every day he struggles with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and survivor's guilt. He has night sweats, insomnia, and nightmares. His PTSD makes it hard for him to control his temper and to be rational sometimes. He lost his best friend in Vietnam, and the weight of survivor's

guilt always causes him to ask the question, "Why me? Why did I survive while others didn't?" Without the war, my dad wouldn't have these symptoms. However, I think that without the Vietnam War I wouldn't have the father I love today. The unanswered question of "Why me?" causes him to feel he needs to "be worthy" of that selection. So, he tries to be the best man he can be. He is a volunteer firefighter in our small town, and constantly seeks other ways to help people as well. For many years, he was a teacher helping at-risk students pass their classes to make sure they graduated high school. I have had kids my age that I barely know come up to me and tell me how much they love my dad. He cared so much for them when they needed it the most, and they realize that.

After Vietnam, he spent two decades roaming the world, experiencing life but also chased by the demons of his memories. In his travels, he was trying to find how he fit in a world that didn't understand him, and that seemed so different than before he left. It was late in his life when he met my mom, and later had me, then my brother. He finally had found where he belonged, but had to struggle every day with his disabilities to keep what he created. Regardless of all that he experienced in that war and all of his struggles, he has been telling me one thing for years: if he could go back and serve his country again, he would.

Although my dad is one hundred percent disabled in the eyes of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to me he is one hundred percent the best dad anyone could ever have. He is my fun-loving, zest-for-adventure father, who taught me how to appreciate Elvis and Sinatra, Coltrane and Tupac, who loves his community, his students, his country, and his family. He instilled these values in me as well, and I know that if it hadn't been for Vietnam, he would not be the man he is today. I admire him more than I can say.