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A Veteran's Legacy
The story of
SSgt Michael D. Ingram

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Growing up, I heard many stories from my father. He served in the Marine Corps as a Radar Intercept Officer in F-4 Phantoms during the Vietnam War. Although he never served in Vietnam, he knew many who did. It was through this scholarship program that I was afforded an opportunity to meet one of those men who was a high school classmate of my dad's. He is Staff Sergeant Mike Ingram, USMC who served as a helicopter engine mechanic, but flew as a CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter crew chief and door gunner while stationed in Vietnam. This experience has opened my eyes to an incredible life of service and duty.

Mike is the son of a U.S. Marine veteran who saw action on Guadalcanal during World War II. Mike carried on a military legacy in his family which continues today as Mike's son is a Gunnery Sergeant in the Marines, his daughter is a retired Navy Chief and his granddaughter is currently serving in the U.S. Navy. SSgt. Ingram entered the Marines shortly after graduation from El Monte High School in El Monte, California and served from 1966-1976. He was deployed to the Republic of Vietnam from August 1968-September 1969.

Lt.Col. George Goodson, USMC (Ret) said it best when he wrote, "A veteran is someone who, at one point, wrote a blank check made payable to 'The United States of America' for an amount of up to and including his life." Mike did just this, taking part in hundreds of missions, and though he had been wounded in combat, turned down two purple hearts, as he believed these were reserved for those men who were maimed or dead. It was not about recognition but serving with honor and, to Mike, it was the acknowledgement of being a Vietnam Veteran that was his true honor.

The primary mission of his CH-46 squadron was to conduct troop insertions, troop extractions and medical evacuation (medevac) missions. A true insight into the mentality involved in combat surfaced when Mike said, "I was going to get even for every brother I saw lost and tried my best to kill

every Vietcong or North Vietnamese I could get in my sights.” He and his crew conducted operations that constantly put them in the line of fire. Through these many missions, Mike survived two crashes and sustained many injuries. Following the second crash, during an emergency reconnaissance team extraction, he had to escape and evade the enemy for a period of three days before being rescued. To this day, he does not know what happened to the Recon Marines that his aircraft was supposed to recover.

After 13 months, at the end of his tour in Vietnam, he applied for a second tour as he did not feel his job was finished. However, due to injuries sustained from his crashes and exposure to Agent Orange, his request was denied. Due to the manifestations of his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), he developed fears when he would hear a helicopter engine start up. This was his primary reason for leaving the Marine Corps. After being honorably discharged following ten years of service to the U.S. Marine Corps, he still had to live with the lingering effects, both mental and physical, of the war.

Upon returning to civilian life, he worked for Flight Systems Inc. in Mojave, California. There he was employed as a mechanic. After leaving Flight Systems, he worked as a mechanic and airframes technician at Lockheed in Palmdale, California. However, after a period of time he was no longer able to work in this occupation because of the haunting memories of his past and physical requirements of the job that he could no longer meet. It was during this time that he had begun to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol to get through the days. “I did OK for a while,” he said in reference to his self-medication for his PTSD. After an incarceration following a motor vehicle accident, which was connected to his alcohol dependence, Mike finally sought medical attention for his PTSD and pain and was prescribed over half a dozen different medications. He also received psychiatric treatment. These

were to help with the pain, night terrors, and depression related to his combat experiences as well as many symptoms associated with his exposure to Agent Orange. In recent months, Mike has had disagreements with the Veterans Administration (VA) over the amount of medications he was taking. He said that he felt like a “zombie” most of the time and that much of his life had become a blur. Ultimately, when he felt that nobody was listening to him, he decided to implement his own detoxification program. Currently, he is taking half of his original medication and says that he now feels as though he has reawakened and is once again ready for life.

In my personal life, I have experienced losing one of my childhood friends to the war in Iraq. My dear friend, PFC. Ryan M. Jerabek, USMC was killed in action on April 6, 2004 in Ramadi, Iraq. For his heroic actions, he was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. Ryan and SSgt. Ingram were so much alike. They both fought for their country, for their brothers, and both viewed serving in the armed forces and especially the Marine Corps, as part of their civic duty. While my friend, Ryan, paid the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq, I also believe that Mike was a casualty of the Vietnam War. For over 40 years, his life has been affected by his past and I believe that he has paid a hefty price for service to his country.

After listening to the stories and considering the current day and age, I asked myself, “How does this relate to me and our present day society?” Currently, we see the same types of problems with our men and women in uniform returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are returning with combat injuries as well as PTSD and struggling to receive the care they deserve from the VA. They have difficulty with transitioning back into civilian life. SSgt. Ingram stated, “While I know that I physically left Vietnam, I, in my mind, am still there and probably always will be.” If we are to continue committing the lives of our servicemen and women to foreign soil, we must respect those

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who have answered the call and provide them with the very best care upon their return. While Mike has said that most of those committed to his care had good intentions, the negative impact of government bureaucracy impaired their ability to meet the requirements of the veterans. Not only is the returning veteran affected by the decisions of those in our government, but those who remain in theater deserve the very best of equipment and support that can be procured. Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall felt that “the politics had eclipsed the veterans, their service and their lives.” This should not be.

From my observation of the armed services, very little has changed with the exception that I believe today’s returning veterans receive much more respect for their service than did the Vietnam veterans. Of the 2.7 million men and women who served in the Vietnam war zone, there are 58,261 names listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall of those killed in action, missing in action or prisoners of war. There were more that 300,000 who were wounded. While the construction of the Vietnam Memorial Wall paid homage to those who were lost and the Three Soldiers Statue pays tribute to all who served in Vietnam, the Vietnam Women’s Memorial pays tribute to the more than 10,000 women who voluntarily served alongside their brothers in the Republic of Vietnam. I don’t think it is nearly adequate to simply build a statue to honor those who are no longer with us. We must, in the present, respect and revere those who serve for they are primarily responsible for maintaining the freedoms we enjoy in America.

My interview with SSgt. Ingram provided me with insight into the trials and tribulations that he endured as well as the mindset of the men and women that I may have the opportunity and honor to work with in my future practice as an occupational therapist (OT). From this experience, I have learned that while I may learn the facts of something as historic and monumental as the Vietnam War, I will

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never truly understand it like those who experienced it firsthand. It is with that understanding that I believe I will be a better professional.

SSgt. Ingram has opened his heart and soul to me on this very personal and sensitive issue as he believed it would help me to become a better practitioner and a better citizen. In occupational therapy, my chosen field, the primary goal is to help individuals live their lives to the fullest. Through the experience of interviewing Mike, I have gained a new perspective into the meaning of service. I cannot thank him enough for providing me with what I consider to be a life changing experience. He has taught me something that I could not possibly learn from a book or in a classroom.

And in that time when men decide
and feel safe to call the war insane
Take one moment to embrace those
gentle heroes you left behind.

Maj. Michael D. O'Donnell
1 January 1970
Dak To, Vietnam

Mike has shown me that there are many people who will touch your life. For him, his brothers in arms will always occupy his consciousness. This is who he was, is and will always be...U.S. Marine
SSgt. Mike Ingram, Vietnam Veteran. Semper Fidelis