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Essay by: Shaylea Walsh

I Always Knew, But Didn't

I always knew he fought,

Fought in the Vietnam War.

I never thought anything of it,

Until I learned a little bit more.

As a child, war was a game.

I formed my fingers in a funny shape,

And ran around yelling, "Bang, bang, bang!"

I didn't know the truth, so I felt no shame.

Now I know it was the bloodiest of battles,

And I now look at him with the highest respect.

I asked what happened, but the memories were still sore,

So I silenced my questions and asked nothing more.

It was the war that brought chaos, pain, and confusion,

The war that was fought in total delusion.

I can never imagine the fear he had,

But I am so proud to be able to call him Dad.

The poem above was written in honor of my father after finding his camouflage uniform hanging in our storage closet. This uniform was part of my dad's life and part of a story that only he really knows. What had my dad experienced, seen, and felt in this uniform? He tried to tell me when I

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sat down to speak with him, but as any parent does; I could tell he was sheltering me from many parts of the story. He, just like a true soldier, wanted to protect me.

My father, Thomas William Walsh, was drafted at the age of 19 into the army. He was sent to Fort Campbell, Kentucky and then to Fort Polk, Louisiana for infantry training. On October, 10, 1970, he was sent to South Vietnam and he was stationed at Camp Eagle. This area I learned was located south of the demilitarized zone or DMZ, a term I had never heard. He was sent to an area with great deadly tension; he was forced into adulthood in a matter of weeks.

Dad, along with hundreds of other young soldiers, were ordered to protect fire bases, and participate in search and destroy missions deep in the Vietnamese jungle. They were given the responsibility of making sure an area was safe for more troops to follow. They were the first soldiers to arrive in an area which meant cutting a path through the jungle using a machete. Once he said he was cutting a trail and cut a branch that was about four inches in diameter. He said the branch seemed soft. He looked again and realized it was actually a snake he had cut in half! My dad has never been fond of snakes.

Dad told me that an infantry man basically carries on his back whatever he might need. He said that included his weapons and ammunition, a poncho, which also served as a tent, usually about five days of food rations, and maybe some extra clothing. He said setting up camp meant deciding if you wanted to wear your poncho or use it to cover you for the night. The poncho was essential because the jungle was so wet. He told me there were times he thought his feet were actually rotting from the moisture.

I asked him if he got to know any of the Vietnamese families or children and he said he had a few experiences. He said children would gather around soldiers when they were in the area in hopes of getting something. They especially liked chocolate and cigarettes. My dad never really knew how old the kids were or the adults either. Vietnamese people look very young for their age, and their body size was deceivingly small. Everyone looked very small in comparison to Americans. The kids usually wore shorts, cast off military uniforms, soldier's clothing, and wore flip-flops on their feet.

The kids were usually pretty clean. My dad saw many families doing their laundry in nearby streams and the kids would be swimming in them at the same time.

Dad said the soldiers drank, swam, and did their laundry in the streams too. He said the Vietnam's landscape and country in general was extremely beautiful. It was lush green with breathtaking coastlines. He laughs when Wisconsinites think we have humidity, because they have never experienced anything like the humidity in a jungle or the monsoon season. He remembered his experiences of torrential rains and actually being terrified of the gushing waters. He also remembered the night sky being so spectacularly beautiful even though he could see tracer rounds flying above. He said it was like shooting stars in some ways and his wish was always the same; to live through another day!

I asked him if he ate anything except military rations and he said he basically stuck to what our government had provided. He said he remembered the rats in Vietnam. He said there were hundreds of them scurrying about everywhere and he and his friends would do target practice on them. He said once he bet the pile of rats was at least three feet high. He said the piles would just mysteriously disappear.

I asked dad if he really experienced combat and he was hesitant to tell me too much. He told me about the equipment, machinery, and cannons he was trained to use. He told me as they set up their camps it was common to have bombs being dropped all around them. He actually has a hearing loss due to the guns and explosions. He does not receive compensation for his injury because he said at the time he could have put in a disability claim, but he was so anxious to go home; he told them he was just fine.

I asked him if he could compare the Vietnam War to the war we are involved in today. My dad always uses the term "War is mans insanity against man." He said that no matter what the war, people think of it as "the white hats against the black hats", or "good guys and bad guys". That is the way politicians present it to the general public, making them think it is a clear choice in making decisions in war. We know in reality that there are those wearing gray hats and those wearing no hats, but only

the politicians have access to the entire pool of intelligence information. The average soldier does not get to make the distinction between hats; the soldier just follows the orders from those in charge.

When returning Vietnam veterans came back home, they were blamed for having made the decisions that were in fact made by the politicians. Veterans of today are honored when they return home. They are rightfully honored for fighting to protect our freedoms and for risking their lives. This honor happens today in part because society realized that Vietnam veterans were not rightfully honored.

Soldiers of all wars should be respected and rightfully honored always!

I have enjoyed being part of the Veterans Day Program here at the high school and at our local American Legion and Dad has always encouraged his kids to take part in it. I volunteer to speak, sing in the choir, and serve at the dinner following the program. I look forward to it every year; it is my opportunity to give something back to our veterans. My family has a long history of serving our country. I am proud of each of them, and am proud of each veteran and each veteran's families.

My father's Vietnam experience changed his life forever, and greatly affected his outlook on life. When he was in high school in the 60s, there was lots of talk about the conflict, the war. Like most high school guys, what he saw on t. v., he never really thought it would affect him. The war protest was growing, but he said he saw it as more of a rebellion against authority. When the threat of the draft became more real to him, he began looking more closely at the arguments of both sides but found himself just more confused. He considered writing a C.O. (Conscientious Objector) appeal, but knew he would have spent the rest of his life trying to convince himself he did the right thing. Dad said, somewhere deep in his heart, at his age now, he feels he ultimately made the right decision. He served his country, and he loves this country. He taught me that we must be thankful for what we have and never forget. We must study and remember history so that we are not doomed to repeat our mistakes. We must always stay informed about government, politics, and world affairs. He has seen death, knows hunger, thirst, and most of all fear! He has learned to live with the decisions he was forced to make. He told me to live with his memories and emotions from war; he must take them and guide them into a positive direction.

Last summer I had the great opportunity to attend Badger Girls State in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Dad, who always stays informed about politics, reminded me about some of the governmental procedures that I had learned through the program and was able to relate them to his experience in the war. He has instilled the importance of being an involved and informed citizen and has always emphasized the importance of a good education. He told me his college education was acquired through the GI Bill.

Education is part of the reason why my father would even share his war experiences with me. He admits he does not usually talk about his experience because it hurts. He says the experience belongs with him and that is where he wants it to stay. It was very painful for him to reminisce about his war time experience, but he knows this story too should be part of my education. He had to clear his throat many times before he would decide what to tell me next. My father through this interview process strongly encouraged me to develop and use good communication skills. I plan on attending the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and major in Communication Sciences and Disorders. He and I talked about how communication is a huge contributor in how we treat, understand, and appreciate each others needs. Preventing future wars could all boil down to how we communicate. Communication just like the objectives and goals of the armed forces is a chance to influence learning, work and interact with others, help others develop their full potential, and improve the quality of life.

I am so very proud of my father and of the veterans in the United States of America. He and so many other veterans serve their country and come home to live modest lives and raise their families with good morals, values, citizenship, and good educations. Without this scholarship opportunity, I do not think my father and I would have ever sat down and had such a close, personal, and emotional conversation about this portion of his life. I better understand what he experienced wearing the uniform that hangs in the storage closet, and I pray for all the soldiers wearing their uniforms today. Thank you sincerely for making this extremely generous scholarship available to students and thank you even more for everything you have given to help others.