

WELCOME HOME

The complex, emotional stress of war affects the vast number of its combatants in various ways. All people are different. Some people may become traumatized by certain particular occurrences. Others may attempt to forget. So many factors, experiences, and personalities become involved in times of war. The effects can be just as diverse as the participants and events. My father served two tours in Vietnam, between 1965 and 1969. I have also had the opportunity to communicate briefly with my uncle about the war.

My father never spoke of the war. I did not even know he was in the Vietnam War until I was 8 years old. My mother observed my attention with the film, *Missing in Action*, one day. She stated: "Your father was there," when she noticed a jungle meant to be in Vietnam. I was completely stunned at her statement. I lost interest in the film and insisted that she share with me her knowledge of his involvement.

My parents met at a zoo, in San Antonio. My father went to the zoo while he was visiting his family on leave in Mercedes, Texas. My mother was there with my aunt. They were from Bandera. After they met, they dated briefly throughout the remainder of his leave. Before he went back to the war, he asked my mother if he could write to her, and she accepted. They corresponded throughout much of the war. The correspondence that they shared was the only account that he ever shared with anyone regarding his personal experience in the war. According to her, he spent two tours in Vietnam. He served as a Morse code operator in a Bell helicopter, which she referred to as 'a Huey.' She explained that there were very few days that passed that he did not get shot at on a regular basis. When my father's helicopter crew pulled their routine maintenance on the helicopter, he often observed that the outside of the panel he operated on was consistently riddled with projectile fragment damage. He regularly heard projectiles 'pinging' outside the helicopter during flight. She showed me numerous air medals he had stashed away. Each medal was decorated with numerous bronze oak leaves. Each leaf was added to a medal awarded to a soldier in the army that was in air service for a certain extended amount of time. He was in the air throughout much of the entirety of his two tours in service. He made reference to her once that he conceded to the fact that he was a 'dead man, living.' He said that dealing with the drudgery of the war became easier when he made that concession. Worrying about dying all the time was harder to deal with, and more stressful. He proposed a deal with her afterwards. He proposed that if he was able to survive the war that she would marry him. She agreed, under the assumption that he would not return. She assumed that he would eventually be killed in action. She allowed to offer words that she felt he wanted to hear. She thought that would be a nice thing to offer a man who she assumed would be dead soon. To her shock, he survived. They were married for 35 years until his death of natural cause.

When he returned home from his second tour, he stopped somewhere on the way home to get a haircut before visiting his mother. My father, who was Native American, appeared every trace of his descent. When he walked into the barber shop to get a haircut, he was refused service. He was in absolute disbelief. He asked "Why?" The shop owner stated, "Well... you're brown." Knowing my father, I can imagine the look of disbelief upon his face. My mother continued to recount what he asked the shop owner next: "Do you mean I've come home from the war, after

helping to defend our country, and I can't get a haircut?" She said that she wasn't there, but she could imagine that if looks could kill, that shop owner would be dead.

I was actually able to discuss a few of the experiences that my uncle, John, had in the Marines during his service in Vietnam. The discussion came up when I asked about a photograph I noticed of him, while I was visiting him recently. I asked him what it was like to serve in Vietnam. He did not mind sharing his experiences. He spoke of when he was one of only a few members of his platoon who survived a battle one night. He mentioned how he was talking to friends in a fox hole before the battle occurred, and by morning, they had been killed. He also mentioned that he was shot in the abdomen that night. He wrote to his cousin, Angel, afterwards, who was in the Army. They had entered the military around the same time. They made an effort, after his injury, to visit each other in Bandera. When John returned home, he went to Angel's house and asked his cousin's mother where Angel was. She said that he was reported missing in action. Angel was never seen again. My mother mentioned that her cousin Angel was an MIA, but I never knew about the story that my uncle John shared with me that day.

I was surprised at my father's response when I first informed him of my enlistment in the Army. I was not sure how he would react, but I was surprised when he became extremely upset. He demanded to take me to the recruiter and somehow withdrawal my enlistment. I did not attempt to argue with him. He was ultimately unsuccessful. After my service, he had a different, more accepting attitude about it. It was interesting how intent he was at having my enlistment withdrawn when it occurred initially. I guess that he just feared that I would have experiences similar to his.