

VVA Chapter 331

Scholarship Essay

Prompt #1 - How has the Vietnam War and its aftermath affected the life of your Vietnam Veteran relative or sponsor and his/her family?

How the Vietnam War Affected My Grandfather

How does a person engage in the brutalities of war and then return to a normal way of life? I asked myself this question after interviewing my grandfather about his Vietnam War service. My grandfather, Michael Lahti, has not been affected by his Vietnam experience in ways that are obvious to others. While the Vietnam War had a significant impact on my grandfather, he was able to use constructive coping mechanisms to manage extreme stress.

When my grandfather, Michael Lahti, was drafted into military service in September of 1969, he was not surprised. He had been living in Fontana, California with his parents and was no longer enrolled in college. He received basic training at Fort Ord in Northern California before his deployment to Vietnam in February of 1970.

Initially, he served as an infantryman and later as a mortar man. He recalled that some days in Vietnam could be rather boring while other days were frightening and intense. Like many veterans, he faced horrific experiences. At one point, he was forced to take cover from enemy fire behind the body of a dead Viet Cong soldier. My grandfather vividly remembers the sights and smells of dead bodies. He became accustomed to these images that surrounded him, as well did his friends. He shared with me a time where there was yet another dead Viet Cong body lying on the ground. He watched as his friend took a stick and poked at the man's brains that had spilled out of his skull.

My grandfather would exchange letters with his parents who were back in the United States. He could tell how worried his parents were about him. Realizing this, my grandfather would deliberately omit from his letters any subject that might upset his parents. He would instead stick to topics like the weather and the termites under his sleeping bag. He was experiencing a horrible ordeal but felt that he should not share these experiences with them.

It would be easy for anyone to be filled with anger and hate if forced into these circumstances. In an effort to cope with the situation, my grandfather made the intentional decision not to be hateful or angry. He chose to accept the situation at hand, as it was out of his control. He did not choose to go to Vietnam, but he could attempt to control his response to the experience. With this new attitude, he moved forward and kept going.

The Vietnamese landscape, wildlife, and nature were interesting to my grandfather. He wanted to take pictures of the landscape, so he gave up going on leave to Australia so he could order photography equipment. Photography was a welcome diversion to the hostility which surrounded him. He became engrossed in photography and used it as an emotional outlet. By focusing on photography my grandfather gave himself some relief from the gruesomeness of war.

The lasting effects of the Vietnam War on my grandfather were less consequential compared to what some veterans face. Initially he was startled by loud noises, he still has the occasional nightmare, and he cannot watch recent war movies because they are too realistic and upsetting. When he returned home, he spoke with a friend who had also fought in Vietnam. This veteran had a much more traumatic experience than my grandfather. My grandfather realized then that he had been more fortunate than other veterans.

While the Vietnam War had a significant impact on my grandfather, he was able to use constructive coping mechanisms to manage extreme stress. By choosing to let go of his anger and delve into photography he was able to endure the emotional toll of such a traumatic experience. His ability to use these coping mechanisms demonstrates he was given the gift of resiliency.

Prompt #2 - What did you learn from talking to your Vietnam Veteran, and what is your feeling on how society's perception of Veteran's has changed since the Vietnam War?

What I Have Learned

My grandfather's experience returning home from the Vietnam War was much different than that of soldiers returning home today. Vietnam Veterans were not celebrated, but oftentimes treated with scorn for fighting in the war. Before coming home to California, my grandfather was concerned over what kind of reaction he might receive from others. He had heard stories of soldiers who were ridiculed once arriving back in the United States and he wanted to avoid any negative interactions. He decided to remove from his uniform all the medals he had earned for his service. My grandfather thought if he wore his medals proudly, it would send a message that he was fighting for glory and may anger people he met. He felt more comfortable not drawing attention to himself, rather than risking an unwelcome encounter. Once reaching California, there was no homecoming celebration waiting for him. He was simply picked up by his parents and driven home. Other relatives did not welcome him home either. Nobody called and nobody wrote. As time went on and he ran into family and friends, no one even made a comment to him about his time at war. Perhaps they did not talk about his Vietnam experience for fear of upsetting him or maybe they did not approve of the war. He had no way of knowing. The silence was isolating.

The attitude in America today is a stark contrast to that of the Vietnam War time period. In the present-day environment, soldiers coming home from war are openly celebrated. Everyone has seen images on the news of soldiers returning home to jubilant crowds. Family and friends gather waving flags, holding signs with welcoming messages, and cheering their return. In the National Football League, there are special weeks called Salute to Service that are dedicated to honoring veterans. Players and coaches wear camouflage colors and military themed clothing to support and honor veterans. Local school programs honor veterans as well. The Frederic High School holds a Veterans Day program every year where veterans and their families are invited to be acknowledged for their service to our country. These veterans are viewed as heroes regardless of which war they served in. In general, Americans now separate their support for veterans from their opinions on our military involvement overseas. We acknowledge the sacrifices that service members make even if we do not agree personally with United States military actions.

Although I was aware that Vietnam Veterans were not always treated well, I did not realize to what extent. Like many people I heard stories of veterans not being served at restaurants and being spit upon in public. The indifference and general disregard for soldiers returning from Vietnam also had a harmful impact. This is something I did not fully grasp until now. I have learned that this attitude was commonplace during the time of the Vietnam War. This is unimaginable for me because so many soldiers at the time were drafted into service and did not choose to fight a war. Listening to my grandfather describe his experience and feelings gave me a new perspective. United States Veterans have served their country and made an enormous sacrifice to do so. While we cannot go back in time and change what so many Vietnam Veterans experienced, we all can learn from past mistakes and do our best, now and in the future, to show appreciation for all those who sacrifice for our country.