

Unsung Heroes

By Charlie Gordon

The definition of an unsung hero is, “a person who makes a substantive yet unrecognized contribution; a person whose bravery is unknown or unacknowledged”. It is also the definition of the Vietnam Veteran. These Veterans served in one of the longest, most controversial and unpopular wars that the United States was involved in. Clearly they are heroes; a conclusion I reached after interviewing my grandpa about his experience in the Vietnam War.

My grandpa served a tour in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967 with the 4th Infantry Division. He left his family behind, which consisted of my grandma and their seven young children all under the age of nine, and sailed by boat for about 30 days, landing in Nha Trang. Immediately upon arrival, they flew directly to Pleiku, located near the Ho Chi Minh Trail, where the 4th Division was stationed. Their job was to stop the North Vietnamese from infiltrating from Cambodia. My grandpa was stationed there for 12 months. He described the public reaction to his return as neutral. No one talked about it to him. In retrospect, he said he felt very fortunate to return to the U.S. before public opinion turned against the troops and the war effort in Vietnam.

After he was home, my grandpa witnessed that the public showed hostility toward the returning troops, especially in the early 1970's. There were reports of crowds booing and spitting upon the servicemen. Some of the public outcry was because the Vietnam War was the first war that has heavily broadcast on television news, showing the horrors of war. Also, troops returning from Vietnam came home in small groups, rather than large units like they do today. There is safety in numbers.

This poor treatment of the returning Vietnam troops saddened my grandpa. He said the servicemen, many who were eighteen as I am now, left their lives in the United States to fight in Vietnam. They were probably terrified in a place where you couldn't tell if man, woman, or child

was the enemy. My grandpa said he remembers heavy artillery fire and bullets whizzing past his head. He said a lot of chemicals, including Agent Orange, were used to clear the jungle. Exposure to these chemicals has led to cancer and other ailments in Vietnam Veterans. The public distain must have been very difficult to take and demoralizing because these brave troops were following orders to serve their country as they had sworn to do. They truly are unsung heroes and are owed respect!

Due to the efforts of organizations, like the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Association, to enlighten the public by memorializing and bringing dignity and honor to those that served in Vietnam, treatment of returning servicemen and women from conflicts today is different. There appears to be much more support and a 'hero's welcome' upon their return, and rightfully so. If the public doesn't believe in war efforts now, their resentment is shown toward government leaders rather than returning troops.