

Vietnam Veterans of America Scholarship Essay

The term “Out of sight, out of mind” applies perfectly to war, as it is impossible to know the horrors of combat without actually seeing it firsthand. Despite wars raging all over the entire world the general American population is more consumed with stories of fashion or pop culture as they simply do not understand the gravity of the situation. One of these people was my uncle Dick Vnuk, until a fateful day in November of 1966 when he was drafted to enlist in the United States Army. He stated himself that he paid no attention to the media coverage of the Vietnam War and had little interest in the subject, until he was ultimately drafted into the war. The story of Dick Vnuk stands as an example for young men and women of today that, even though the war is happening far from home, there are people in combat who were in the same position as them at one point. This is exactly the point that Mr. Vnuk is making by conducting interviews, as he is not completing them for his own personal gain, but instead to honor the memory of those who were lost in the war, and to warn the future generation about war so they do not suffer the same fate. While this is his goal now, it took a long period of time in order to formulate this opinion; time that can be broken down into three main sections – his time before, during and after the Vietnam War.

Before serving time in the Vietnam War, Dick Vnuk was a simple young man, not taking much heed of the dangers that lie with him. Dick lived a typical childhood life in the Manitowoc area in which he currently resides. The concept of war was an uncertain one, because even though Dick’s father had been in war previously the younger members of the family knew nothing of what combat meant. With this in mind, Dick paid little attention to stories about war brewing on the other side of the world, and instead focused on creating his own niche as a young adult. However, this was cut short in November of 1966 when he was drafted by the United States Army at the young age of twenty-three years old. Being drafted created a whirlwind of emotions in the young man as he actually contemplated fleeing the country in order to escape the violent war he knew little about. However, he believed that by leaving the country he would be turning his back on his country as well as his entire family. Due to this Dick decided to accept his fate, as he went on to complete boot camp at Ft. Lennon Missouri and later Ft. Polk, Louisiana, where he completed specialized training. Of the training process, he stated that it was difficult, as you never were able to make friends with anyone due to a process known as “individual rotation”. Individual rotation meant that you rotate to different bases and camps by your lonesome and without the rest of your squad, meaning that you have to meet a whole new set of people, therefore never developing any deep relationships. While at the time this seemed like a large concern, in retrospect it proved not to be as there were more trying times than simply being separated from a friend. Of the normal military life Dick stated, “It was difficult physically and emotionally, but it was something everyone could withstand and was no problem”. Despite normal military life presenting no issue, Dick was destined for more than the standard military life. While Dick was thrown into a military setting and given exposure to the concept of war he was still unable to comprehend just what it would entail until he arrived in Vietnam.

During the time period of May 5th 1967 through May 5th 1968, Dick Vnuk found out all he wanted to about war, and perhaps more. Dick Vnuk was transported to Vietnam on May 5th 1967 and was immediately placed in the combat squad known as the Army 1st Cavalry. Dick did not know any of his squad members at the time, meaning he was forced to deal with the initial fright of war by himself. However, he would quickly be exposed to the every day life of the combat soldier. He stated that a normal day would go something like this; first thing in the morning, break camp and go on “Search and destroy” missions in the jungle which was more or less to find enemy soldiers or hideouts and destroy them. These missions would last all day, finally ending at sundown at which point they would set up a camp by building foxholes, and then taking measures to protect their safety including; giving positions to artillery operations, setting up claymore mines surrounding the camp and finally having someone take up a listening post. Due to the nature of their work the squad struck a fear into the Vietnamese villagers as most thought that the soldiers were intent on destruction. Nevertheless, the soldiers did attempt to bring some cheer to the civilians, especially the children as they were nothing more than innocent bystanders. Despite these attempts to befriend the children, the soldiers were mostly avoided as every knew that communication with American soldiers could translate death at the hands of the ruthless Vietcong. Also, they

soldiers lived far away from the central villages, as to not bring any unwanted attention onto the civilians, but coincidentally the lack of social contact and constant destruction took a toll on one's psychological complex. Thankfully was able to make one close connection to a fellow soldier, who he referred to as his "Foxhole buddy", as they were able to watch each other's back as well as communicate to each their own personal struggles with the war. However, this was cut short when his so called "Foxhole buddy" was killed in combat, leaving Dick reeling. It was at this point that he realized that his number one intention was to simply return home safely. Dick did go on to survive the war despite being physically wounded, however the psychological scars are still prevalent despite physical wounds being long since healed.

Looking at events in retrospect always yields a clearer view of the overall event, and this certainly holds true for Dick Vnuk's idea of the Vietnam War. While Dick had no opinion before entering the war, he questioned the intelligence of going to war in Vietnam, because "The people were involved in a civil war a long time before America came, so there was no real stability". Also he stated that "To many civilians were killed during the war, for every soldier that died, 8 innocent civilians were killed". He believed that the general population was right to question the war as he knew first hand that many bombing accidents and similar events led to a significant number of innocent deaths. Due to his dislike for how the war was ran he said he felt like "A basketball player sitting on the opposing bench" on the plane ride back to America. He admits that he was out of touch with society, and instead of letting his feelings known, he simply hid them away for many years. During that time he would go on to become a successful teacher and teach many students important life lessons, but perhaps none more important than the lesson he gave students on the subject of the Vietnam War. Dick was urged by his daughter to share his experiences with her classroom, as she has gone on to be a teacher as well, at which point he finally decided to share his knowledge on the subject. His lesson on the Vietnam War garnered so much interest amongst the students that they urged him on to write a book, chronicling his experiences, and he did so with his book *Tested in the Fires of Hell*. Not only did he write a book telling of his old feelings, he created new feelings by traveling back to Vietnam in 2007, in order to "Prove to the villagers that Americans are good". He certainly proved this in a big way by actually bringing an exchange student from Vietnam back home with him in order to study nursing in collage and bring medicine back to her village. Dick also is an avid member of several veterans' organizations such as the AMVETS and the Vietnam Veterans of America, as he believes they serve as a support group and can help someone move past their nightmares as everyone is on common ground. After witnessing what he did, he still believes that the military is a fine path for a young person to take as it can teach you discipline in addition to paying for college, the only concern being war, as he stated that "The Army doesn't prepare you for combat, as combat challenges your whole morality". Given time to think about his role in the Vietnam War, Dick Vnuk realized that by speaking up he is keeping the memories alive of war.

Throughout his life Dick Vnuk has gone from being uninformed and unmoved about notion of war, to knowing all to well the horrors that it carries. He started out a young man who believed that "I will never have to go to war, there's somebody already out there doing that" but he was selected to serve his country, and he did so even with an idea that the war was not serving the purpose that it was intended to. Despite this sentiment he went to Vietnam in order to serve his country and his families honor. He witnessed many horrible occurrences during his time which he was not able to express as people of the veterans as cruel savages. However, this is as far away from the truth as one can get as Dick was chosen to go to Vietnam and struggled with the idea of the war just as much as everyone else despite being an actual member of the war. It is only now that he is able to share his knowledge and feelings on the subject as the nation has realized the error in their ways. Due to this newfound support Dick has written a book and given many interviews on the subject, despite the fact that he says "I don't like talking about the war". Nevertheless he does continue to talk about the subject, also continuing to relive the pain and hardship of the war in order to warn future generations. Dick Vnuk continues to pick at the psychological scars that are Vietnam that future generations learn from the failures of the violent and nasty war he was a part of.