

Short

A story About Vietnam

My story starts with my enlistment in the Army. I was 19 years old, an American Indian with a Mexican last name, male, poor, divorced parents, and a dropout. I was living in St. Paul, Minnesota with my mom, stepfather who was white, younger brothers and sisters.

My mom was a full blood Ihanktonwan (Yankton Sioux) born and raised on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. I was raised by my mother's family and like many Indian children my grandmother was important in my life. She passed away when I was 12. I was fortunate to have family members who were good role models. They taught me my values and beliefs. One was males were the primary providers and protectors of the family. I didn't want to be a burden to my mom and could and did not want to stay there. I had to and wanted to do something, but didn't know what. The outlook was not good!

One day in early fall, I went to the army recruiting office and enlisted. I was one of the few who actually enlisted for Vietnam. I had a desire serve and be a warrior since childhood so it was natural for me. I also had one of those I don't care attitudes. So, I signed up for an all-expense paid vacation to the warm lands of south east Asia.

I remember when I was in junior high about 12 years old a male teacher told the class and he singled us boys out we would probably be going to Vietnam. At the time, I thought the war would be over before then. Well that day came and I remembered what he said.

After I signed all the papers and passed all the physical exams and tests, I was sworn in. The recruiter asked if I wanted a delayed entry and report around Christmas. I thought that was alright and said OK. I spent the next 3-4 months saying good bye, especially to the girls. After a while, they started asking if I was actually leaving. I guess I made too many rounds with my story.

On December 23, 1970, at about 4AM, I was to report to downtown St. Paul to catch a bus. I remember the time. My mom knew I was leaving, which was not new to her. I often left and stayed with other relatives. It was early when I got up and woke up my mom and step dad. They would give me a ride downtown. I remember it was really cold that morning and dark. No one really said anything, I don't remember saying anything. Once we got there, I got out of the car said goodbye and got on the bus.

Everything seemed to go fast after this, I reported to Ft. Campbell Kentucky for basic training, for 8 weeks and then sent to Ft. Rucker Alabama for AIT (Advanced Individual Training), which was for Aircraft Mechanics. I would end up as a door gunner in Nam. I remember standing in formation when we graduated from AIT and was given a certificate. The first thought to come to my mind was my schooling. I knew I do things despite what my teachers said to me in school or how they treated me. I often felt like I was a failure, but my experience in the Army proved that I wasn't.

A few days after I completed my AIT a Sergeant asked me why I was still in Ft. Rucker. He said that my orders were in and I was headed for Nam. I said I didn't know. He said he would get my orders if I gave him \$10 bucks. I said yeah as soon as I cleared the payroll, but I needed my orders first. He gave me my orders and I cleared payroll, but never gave him the money. I figured he was trying to rip me off, but I came from the Rez and knew a hustle.

My orders said I had ten days leave before leaving for Nam. I headed home and spent the next 10 days visiting and seeing the girls. I didn't have much money, because when I got home my mom was without electricity. They could not pay their bill. So, I paid it but it took all I had, but still had a good time.

When the time came, I flew from St. Paul to California. I was given new gear, fatigues, and sent to Vietnam. The plane was a big one and had only soldier boys on it. There must have been a couple of hundred. We, first flew to Alaska then to Japan from there went on to Vietnam.

When we got close to Nam everyone was pretty excited or nervous. As the pilot announced our descent into Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam everybody was quiet. I don't remember the hour, but it was a dark night with no stars. All lights were turned off inside and outside the aircraft on the descent. Didn't want to make it easy for the enemy to shoot us.

When we first entered the aircraft, I grabbed a window seat because I needed to see outside. Did not like the aisle or middle seat. As I looked out my window, I could see helicopters strafing along the runway. It looked like fireworks, a real war zone and it made me feel very anxious.

Once we landed and stopped, my feelings of anxiousness increased, an extreme high all at once. This feeling would become the norm in the days to come. I don't think I was scared at first. That would come later an experience the fear of death, which changed my attitude for life. But that is another story.

When we came to a stop we were told to move to the doors, to keep moving and not stop. Sergeants were shouting at us to keep moving, not stop and get to the busses that were waiting for us. As I took my first step into the doorway two things hit me like a wall. It caused me to pause at the door and look. The first was the heat and humidity. I never experienced anything like it in my life. It was like walking into a sauna, really hot even though it was night.

The second and most unforgettable was the smell. It smelled like something was dead. In that moment, I learned what war smelled like. The smell would permeate our clothing and souls for the rest of our lives. When we experienced, saw, and felt the actual death of others that would never leave us.

When we got on the bus which was like school bus, we were told to take a seat and keep quiet. Once again, I grabbed a window seat. which had metal screens. I was thinking, I wanted a weapon and was kind of angry they didn't give me when I got off the plane. When we got to a hooch it took a while for us to settle down. Guys were talking but it wasn't loud. When we noticed the mosquitos started in us which was bad. Couldn't sleep the first night

because of them. Curled up in my poncho roasted, but the minute I came up for air they bite the hell out of you.

Once in country, I stayed in Cam Ranh Bay for a couple of days until I was assigned a duty station. I had time to process when I entered the service to the time I entered Nam. Starting with that cold night in December 1970 and four months later, April 1971 I was in Vietnam. I had a year to serve in country and was just starting my first and only overseas tour of duty.

When I was given my duty assignment a place called Zion, I was told to catch a ride on a deuce and half truck, which would take me there. In order to get there, we needed to leave the base and enter open country. That was something because when we left the base and entered open territory the roadside was covered with graves. I thought to myself the people buried their dead where they could. The ride was long and hot.

As I was getting into the truck two guys were waiting. The one guy riding shotgun quickly slid over, told me to ride shotgun, and shoved his M-16 into my hands, which was great with me. I finally had a weapon in my hands

When he did this, he said I'm too short! I figured he was talking about getting shot and the door was not safe. I would be his shield if we took fire. I later found out that short meant having few days left in country before being shipped home. One day I found myself short and ready to go home.