

All for Nothing

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Soldiers were not supposed to wear any kind of jewelry because the Vietcong would get it off as quickly as possible by cutting your finger off for a ring or your hand off for a watch. I always wore my wedding band anyway, except for one night when I had a funny feeling that told me not to wear it; so, I put it in my pocket. While on a search and destroy mission, my troops and I were overrun by Vietcong. They outnumbered us, and I told my troops to run for cover.

One of my men in particular was shot and was dying and said to me, "Don't leave me Sarge." I didn't want to leave him to die by himself, so I stayed. Once he died, it was too late to run and I knew they were coming. My only choice was to play dead by rubbing the blood from my men that died all over me and lay face down in the dirt. I knew if I moved, I would be dead. The Vietcong came in to see if everyone was dead and to take their jewelry. They passed a bayonet on my back several times by sticking it in through my back and pulling it out, ripping my skin. I knew better than to move or holler. I had to bite my tongue. The thing I remember about that moment was the fear of dying. I really don't remember the pain I went through, just the fear of not getting to see my wife and son again. I was really scared. I didn't move at all and then they left.

Jimmy Allen Stelly, born July 9, 1944, in Opelousas, Louisiana, grew up a normal, happy child who had many friends. In high school, Jimmy was voted wittiest of the class and was considered the class clown. He was liked by everyone, including his teachers and other adults. He was always laughing, having a good time, and enjoying life. He was athletic and played basketball, even receiving "Best Free Throw" from Opelousas High School. He also ran track

and held state records for many years for the one-mile run. He was nicknamed Bogay, meaning "buggy," because he trotted around the track like a buggy until he reached a certain point; then, he would break and pass up his competitors, winning every time.

Jimmy joined the army at the age of eighteen because he wanted to serve his country. He supported the cause, which was to stop communism in Vietnam, so it would not make it to the United States. Jimmy's lasting thoughts on the cause of the war were, "All the men that died and got wounded, it was for nothing because communism took over in Vietnam." He said he had no positive experiences from this war because nothing was accomplished.

On June 6, 1963, Jimmy was sent to Fort Polk to begin basic training. From Fort Polk, he went to Fort Carson, Colorado, and then spent one year in Korea. One day, someone approached him with papers and told him if he signed the papers, he could go home three months early. What Jimmy did not know at the time was that he was actually tricked into signing up for three more years of service. After he spent three months at home, thinking he was out of the Army, he received orders through the mail stating that he had to report to Fort Hood, Texas, in one week. It was then that he knew he had been deceived into signing for additional time in the military. While stationed in Fort Hood, he became classified as a Sergeant. From Fort Hood, he was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia, for one year.

While in Fort Benning, Jimmy was an assistant instructor to a Lieutenant Colonel at the Infantry School, and he trained soldiers to become career officers. Within the first two months of being stationed at Fort Benning, Jimmy went through Ranger Training where he learned how to parachute. In addition, he did jungle training, where he was taught how to survive in a jungle environment. Thereafter, he parachuted once a month to receive jump pay. He enjoyed parachuting and its accompanying adrenaline rush. Two months after arriving at Fort Benning,

Georgia, Jimmy called his high school sweetheart in Opelousas and told her, "Let's get married. I am coming home on Sunday and we can get married on Monday." He took one week off to get married; his wife then packed up her belongings, and they both returned to Fort Benning to start their new life together. Three months later, Jimmy's wife became pregnant.

When Jimmy's wife was seven months pregnant, one of Jimmy's friends saw his name on the list for Vietnam and went to his house to tell him. Knowing his wife was close to delivery, he realized Jimmy would not want to leave his wife and would fear her going into early delivery as a result of his leaving for Vietnam. Jimmy spoke to the officer in charge and had his name taken off the list, temporarily. Three months after the birth of his son, he received notice that he would leave to go to Vietnam in March of 1967.

His wife and son were left behind to live in a nightmare where a ringing phone was an extremely intense sound, as she was afraid of the reply on the other end. When the news was on the television or radio, his wife was glued to it, fearing the worst about her husband's division. In the beginning, a priest and Colonel would deliver the devastating news to the family. Eventually the army started sending taxis to the family's home and would have the taxi driver give the wife or other family members a telegram informing them of their loved one's death. Anytime taxi cabs approached, the wives panicked, screaming at the drivers to get off of their street; they did not want to hear that their loved one died. It was through Christ that Jimmy's wife dealt with his absence.

Jimmy left for Vietnam at the age of twenty-one; he was in the 9th Infantry Division and was stationed in the south of Vietnam in Mekong Delta. Vietnam had the same terrain as Louisiana; there were swamps, and it was humid. There were no cold winter months in Vietnam, though—just summer days all year long. Unlike Louisiana, Vietnam had jungles. In addition,

there were monsoons that lasted for two months at a time. The only time the soldiers experienced relief from the rain was when they were able to go to the home base and get into tents; this was rare, however.

One important thing the soldiers had to do was keep dry socks because the continuous wetness caused jungle rot, which is military slang for a fungal foot infection that produces painful sores on the top of the foot; still, almost everyone was afflicted. Leeches were also a problem, and some people had around five at a time attached to them. The soldiers would pair up and burn the leeches off of each other to insure that the leeches would let go and then could be removed. If they merely pulled them off, they would get infected because the head could stay in the soldier's body.

While in Vietnam, Jimmy and his troops went on countless raids. On one of their raids, Jimmy was shot in his left leg, and the bullet went all the way through. One week later, however, he was fighting again. In another raid, his troops were overcome by the North Vietnamese, also known as the Vietcong and communist, and Jimmy was captured. While he was a prisoner of war (POW), he was tortured relentlessly by the Vietcong. They seemed solely concerned with torture and had no desire to question him about the United States. The torture was so devastating for him that, over time, his mind blocked most of it out of his memory; one of the few things he remembers was the Vietcong often hitting his knuckles with a large stick.

The only food provided to him was a small amount of rice, and he was never provided any fluids. In addition, the Vietcong would ask, "You hungry?" and then would throw dead rats at him. In order to survive the two weeks he was a POW, Jimmy had to go to extremes; he would take his sweat-drenched shirt and ring it out so he could drink the fluid from it. In addition, he had to drink his urine. If not for this, however, he would have died from dehydration. After two

weeks of being held prisoner, Jimmy was able to escape when the Vietcong fell asleep. Although it took him one week to get back, he was able to survive in the jungle because of his earlier training.

Jimmy remains haunted by an event that occurred when he led his troops into a field looking for Vietcong. Jimmy then noticed a boy around five years of age running from some Vietcong with a hand grenade strapped to his chest; previously, the Vietcong pulled the plug on the grenade and told the little boy to run into Jimmy's troops. Realizing what was going on, Jimmy told his men to scatter. Moments later, the little boy, running and crying toward the troops, blew up. The only physical injuries the troops sustained were shrapnel from the grenade, but the mental effects have been everlasting.

There were no front lines in Vietnam; the enemy was all around. The Vietcong had tunnels everywhere and were able to escape from the American soldiers easily through the foliage. Vietcong lived in the tunnels and even had hospitals there to treat their soldiers. To kill the foliage and make it easier for the American soldiers to see and fight the enemy, the United States' troops sprayed the foliage with Agent Orange. What they did not anticipate was the outcome of Agent Orange; it contaminated the water, and the soldiers had to put tablets in their canteens to kill the bacteria and chemicals, which tasted awful.

On May 26, 1967, Jimmy was wounded after a soldier walking in front of him stepped on a booby trap. Despite setting this off, the soldier survived without any harm from the trap. However, Jimmy and another soldier behind him were not so lucky. The soldier next to Jimmy suffered from two broken legs and a concussion, while Jimmy had a hole in his back that left shrapnel lodged in the right lobe of his liver, which was never removed because of associated risks. In addition, he fractured two ribs and his right leg had wounds throughout. The medivacs

from a helicopter thought he was dying. When a soldier was wounded, he would ask the medics for a cigarette; this was the soldier's way of finding out if the medics thought he was going to die. Namely, if the medics thought he was dying, he was given a cigarette as a last wish. Jimmy received a cigarette.

Despite his initial prognosis, Jimmy survived and was shipped to a hospital in Japan, where he remained from June 5 until September 14, 1967. From there, he was sent to the hospital in Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio. On his way to San Antonio, in a plane full of wounded soldiers, the plane stopped in California for a layover, and they stayed overnight at Travis Air Force Base. As Jimmy and other wounded soldiers were escorted from the plane on stretchers, they were met by protesters of the war who spit on them and called them baby killers. This was devastating to him, as he felt blamed for the actions of the Vietcong.

The next day, he was sent to Fort Sam Houston, where he stayed several months to recover from his war wounds. While he was in the hospital at Fort Sam Houston, Jimmy spoke with a soldier who was being released from the hospital and sent back to Vietnam. He told Jimmy, "Don't worry Sarge, I'll kill one for you." Jimmy was angered by his comment and responded, "It's punks like you that put me here in the first place." Jimmy did not consider Vietnam a game; instead, he thought it to be war. He did not share the attitude of the private. Upon his release from the hospital, he was sent to Fort Polk to finish out his time in the military. For his time served, Jimmy received two purple hearts, in addition to other medals.

When Jimmy's son visited him in the hospital, he screamed when he was placed on his dad's lap and acted like he had never seen his dad before. His son was seven months old when Jimmy was wounded, and it took his son nearly two months before he felt comfortable around him. It was as if his son sensed the mental trauma his dad had experienced. Needless to say,

Jimmy did not come home the person he was before he left; he was different, both mentally and physically.

Additionally, the Agent Orange used to spray the foliage affected thousands of soldiers. Jimmy was one of those affected and received \$12,000 in a class action lawsuit. To this day, his face and head break out with a rash, and he could be afflicted down the road with cancer and additional health risks. Deformed offspring are another side effect of the disease. After Jimmy's return from the war, his wife gave birth to a healthy daughter on October 30, 1968. It was not until months after their daughter's birth that they became concerned with her having effects from Agent Orange, as there were reports of soldiers having children born without limbs or with mental defects. They both watched her often for any signs of mental deformities, since physically she was perfect.

When he returned home, Jimmy did not deal with what happened in Vietnam and never has. While he was excited to be home and to see his family, he was distant from people and has remained on an emotional roller-coaster. He has had many nightmares about the things that happened in Vietnam and has relived moments in his sleep. For instance, one night, he tried to choke his wife, thinking she was the enemy. Afraid of waking him by calling his name, his wife pretended to be one of his men, saying, "It's all right, Sarge; it's me"; remarkably, he stopped. He has also had crazed emotional outburst, including flashbacks, and has attempted suicide on numerous occasions. This included trying, sometimes successfully, to jump out of moving vehicles. His actions have put his family and himself through emotional hell. In 1984, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress and with manic depression, or bipolar disorder. Medication and psychiatric help gave Jimmy and his family major relief. He has also been diagnosed with an explosive disorder.

In addition to mental issues, he has been dealing with many physical problems, as well. Jimmy has lived with pain in his injured leg for many years. Initially, he had to wear a brace on his leg and, eighteen years later, had it amputated about six inches below the knee. Although an amputation is considered to be an extremely painful surgery, when Jimmy got out of surgery, he was relieved of the pain he had endured for all of those years and only felt comfort. Other physical conditions he now lives with as a result of being wounded in Vietnam include the effects of Agent Orange, a heart condition that resulted in a double bypass, gradual hearing loss in his left ear, cellulites, and poor circulation in his left foot and leg just above the ankle. Every year, he is in and out of VA Hospitals. The hospitals have become a second home for him and his family.

As a result of his health problems, Jimmy was forced to retire at the age of thirty-seven. He formerly was employed at the Opelousas Power Plant as an operator technician, where he began working shortly after returning home. He wanted to be a police officer and took the job at the plant until the police force was hiring; however, he ended up staying at the plant until he retired. His career was not benefited by any skill he learned in the Army, as he was only taught how to kill and survive.

Jimmy Stelly entered the Army as a man who loved life and his country so much that he wanted to be among the ones who helped to make a difference. But, his family says that the man who left home died in Vietnam; he has never been the same since. He has one son and one daughter and is still married to his high school sweetheart. According to Jimmy, this is not common, as many women left their husbands because they could not deal with the men they had become. Many of the soldiers also became homeless and now live on the streets since they could not handle the effects of the war. If it was not for Jimmy's wife standing by his side, fighting by

his side, and crying by his side, he does not believe he would still be here.

Jimmy's family, in so many ways, feels like they were in Vietnam, too. His children were put through so much hardship from the time they were born and endured more than anyone should in any lifetime. His son has had many resulting emotional problems, but his daughter only became stronger. I know because I am Jimmy's daughter. I endured my share of emotional problems growing up, but it has taught me to live life to the fullest, to laugh at my problems, and to accept what I cannot change.

I can remember family members saying my dad was not the only one that fought in Vietnam. They said it was time he got over it. As a child, I felt differently, as I understood he fought in a war. I expected him to feel the way he did. When my dad told me stories about the war and what he went through, I would go in my room and cry because my dad was subjected to so much horror. Since I was born, I have only known the dad from Vietnam and merely heard stories of how he was before he went. Through all of the pain, there still were some wonderful times. From early on, I have always understood my dad and could not comprehend why everyone else had a problem understanding what my dad went through. My mom just recently confessed that she wanted the old Jimmy back and had not accepted what he has become.

My dad gave up a great deal for his country. Instead of being welcomed by the citizens for whom he fought, however, he was greeted by their spit and name-calling. My dad was not the only one changed by the war; his family and friends were altered, as well. I will always be affected in some way by this senseless war, but I will never blame my dad for any mental trauma endured. Jimmy Stelly always has been and always will be a hero to me, and I will remain forever proud to call him my dad.

Dr. Edward's Comments: *Ms. Mason's story about a Vietnam veteran's experiences during and after the war began as the completion of an oral history project for a senior-level Curriculum and Instruction course. Her work demonstrates the value of school assignments that move beyond the classroom to teach.*