

“Survive”

My father, Thomas, is a Vietnam war vet who served from 1967-1968. He served in the 2nd battalion, 26th marines and was in the entire Tet Offensive as a teenager.

He was a poor kid from the Bronx projects who had nothing going for him and dropped out of high school to enlist with the Marines at 17 years old. He now says that it was good he came from the projects when going to Nam because it was just another war to survive. He has two purple hearts and all the letters he sent to his late father.

He is a fantastic storyteller and a prime example of how the Vietnam War affected the men who fought for the rest of their lives... how they relate to their wives and family, the substance abuse that he had to battle as a young man coming home from Nam, the health consequences and disabilities as he ages, and the fear he finds in starting to feel emotions. Just recently my father started shooting at the local gun range, a big step because he never used to be able to watch fireworks. He came home happy, with a prize, and spoke of how "Yeah, everyone said it wasn't fair 'cause I was a marine... I said hey, I killed a couple in my time!" He then started talking about a man he killed and how he went up to the body afterward, pulled out the man's wallet and saw pictures of the deceased man's family inside. Telling this story, in greater detail of course, was the first time I ever saw my dad cry.

Following this I started inviting him over to talk about it and the raw stories kept coming, from friends dying in rice paddies, having a NDE after getting hit by a mortar, watching a friend (who later died from being treated too late) be told he had to stay on site even with a 104 fever, carrying a comrade's maggot-filled leg through miles of jungle just so a part of him would be sent home.

—Shannon, Cocksackie