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### Military Life

My father made it pretty clear that I was eighteen and should be out on my own. I either had to get a job or I could join the military; I had a very low draft number, and a very low grade point average in high school, so I wasn't going to get a deferment. I knew that I was going to get drafted, and what I had heard was if you get drafted then the army put you where they needed you, and what they needed were infantrymen. I hadn't the strongest interest in being an infantryman. I heard if you joined, you could choose what kind of job you want to do when you are in the military, so I joined for a particular job. I went to get in the line for air force, but it was very long, with a lot of people interested in staying out of combat arms. But I was in a hurry to get into the military, so I got into the shortest line at that time, which was the army. I had no trouble joining the army.

I felt like I made the biggest mistake in my life. But I also felt like there was nothing much I could do about it; at the time I literally believed I belonged to the military, and once I raised my hand and said "I do," I belonged to the government, and any violation of their rules could land me more difficulties than I rather face. I was resigned to it even though I wasn't looking forward to it.

For the first four weeks or so I didn't think I was going to make it through boot camp, it was pretty awful. It was a systematic tearing down of one's beliefs and confidence in oneself and individuality. What they wanted to do was make you a member of a group, and to do that

they had to strip away everything that made you an individual. So for the first four weeks I was a little frustrated at how cruel that process can be, because along with the mental stuff was the physical - they really worked you. Morning, Noon, Night, they were in your face, they were yelling at you, screaming at you, physically punishing you, treating you mostly like dirt, never calling you any human names. After the first four weeks or so I started to get more disciplined, more accepting of what the parameters were, and I started to pull together as a team. I also started to get into physical shape; it's almost like there was nothing they can do to you that really bothers you that much. If they think that they could punish me by running me seven miles, I would say, "Great, let's run ten." because heck, it didn't bother me anymore. By the end of the eight weeks a transformation took place; I felt like I was invincible. They had me trained to kill and follow orders. I think the system worked pretty well; very few people didn't come out trained on the other end.

I was in Massachusetts for over a year for advance training; I was in the army security agency, and I had thirteen weeks of basic Morse code that I had to learn. After that there was sixteen weeks of advanced school, and I was training to be a radio teletype intercept operator, so it was a communication station work. That took over a year to get trained for, and then they sent me to a communication station in Africa; I stayed there for a year. I would've been there longer, but the army security agency was reducing the number of the people in the agency, and they made a call throughout the agency that if anybody would go into the tactical regular army and out of the agency, they would give a year off their enlistment. I had joined for four years, so I was like, "tchhh, I would do it, where do I sign?" So instead of being in Ethiopia for a minimum of a year and a half, I left after one year, and they sent me to Germany to finish my last year.

Germany was a whole different army than the one I was in.

I would've loved to stay in Ethiopia. Ethiopia was the best duty a person could ask for. They didn't really play army there. I put the uniform on, I went to work, and that was about all it had in common with being in the military. There was very little discipline; the company commander would nag me about getting a haircut once in a while, but other than that they really didn't pull a lot of ranking stuff. I was given a lot of responsibility and trusted to do the job. I was treated more like a professional.

A typical day in Ethiopia was getting up in the morning, getting ready for work, putting on my clothes, going downstairs, and getting on the bus. They drove me out to this communication station about three miles outside of the town. It was double barbed-wire fence, several buildings, with antenna fields outside of it. They were all over the landscape out there. We'd drive through the double-gated fence, go into the building, do our eight hours and get back on the bus and go back to our place. We'd do that for six days straight, six evenings straight, and six midnights straight. We'd get two days off in between each of those, we called that a trick. When we got back everything else was taken care of. We had houseboys. They did the laundry, took it to downtown and brought it back, put it in our lockers. They cleaned the barracks, and we didn't do any inspections. We paid twenty dollars a month each for the houseboys.

Ethiopians worked all over the base. Most of them spoke English. They liked Americans. In fact, everywhere I've been in the whole world everyone seems to like Americans. I don't think they liked our policies, but they liked the American people.

In Germany it was a nightmare. There were a bunch of draftees for the most part. A lot of Vietnam Vets coming back from country who were sent the Germany to dry out from all the

drugs and alcohol abuse that was going on. We were holding them over in Germany instead of sending them back to the States. There was a lot of racism and trouble on the posts with the groups of people getting along. It was regular army -- they were yelling, screaming, they wanted everybody to play the army game. They didn't have a real mission; it was a lot of training in case the Soviets attack Europe. We would always train to provide tactical communication support to other countries and other branches of the service.

When I was in Germany, I realized by talking to a lot of draftees they had a lot of knowledge about things that I really didn't know much about. When I asked them about where they learned all these things, they told me they learned them in college. So I thought that sounded good, going back to college. So when I got out of the army, my old man asked me, "What are you gonna do?" I said, "Well, Imma go to college." And he went, "What for?" I went to community college, because you didn't have to have a great high school record to go to community college, so I went to a community college near Palm Desert and transferred to Davis two years later. After I graduated from Davis I liked the university so much I decided that I'd stay here, so I got a job here.

When I went to college, the biggest issue that made me interested in Veteran's Affairs was the way that the guys were treated after the war. What I saw was that the soldiers got blamed for the war in Vietnam. They were the targets of America, the society, when they came home, as to who was responsible for what happened there. It wasn't just the government, it was the guys. The guys were nineteen years old on average. Nineteen year olds, I don't think, should be held responsible for wars. I think in many ways that whole generation was scarred by that war, whether you served in the military or didn't. Everyone had deep-rooted feelings about that period, and to see Vietnam veterans treated the way they were in terms of medical care was

heartbreaking for me. I tried to do what I could to represent the veteran's opportunity for education.

When I was eighteen years old I didn't know much about the war. The only thing I saw was The Green Berets, and that's about all I knew about Vietnam. I wasn't even sure where it was, just like Ethiopia; when they said, "You are going to Ethiopia," I was like "Where the hell is that?" I think slowly but surely as I experienced what was going on and talked to other veterans, by the time I got out of the military I was totally convinced that we were doing the wrong thing, we were heading in the wrong direction, and that we were never going to get ourselves out of Vietnam. Nixon was the president, and he said that we were going to leave, but we had to leave with honor, whatever that meant, and what that did was drag out the war even longer. I think the country was exhausted from the war and we wanted to get out, but it was going too slowly. So I think people were angry and were getting more and more adamant about the need for the US to get out of Vietnam. It was extremely wasteful, thousands of guys were dying for real no apparent reason, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese were dying, and it wasn't clear what they were dying for either. For what? It didn't seem that at the time the South Vietnamese wanted necessarily to fight for their freedom, or at least they weren't in the position to secure it, and we weren't going to be able to stay there forever and ensure it. It just seemed like a lose-lose situation all around, and still more and more guys were getting killed. It was heartbreaking to see that many casualties. It kind of reminds me of what's going on now in Iraq.