

**Topic:** My Father's enlistment and life in the military during the Vietnam era.

**Abstract:** My father was born in small town Texas. His father relocated them to the Los Angeles area so they could have more opportunities available to them. My father made the choice to enlist in the army rather than run the risk of being drafted. He chose to do this so he could better determine his role in the army. He quickly rose through the ranks due to circumstance; and dealt with the death of his older brother in Vietnam.

**Key words:** Army, relocation, drill instructor, mechanic, helicopter, handshake, father, Grandfather, Texas, Los Angeles

My father was born January 13, 1948. This period immediately following World War 2 was a time in which the United States was experiencing a massive boom. Child birth rates rose, jobs were plentiful, and the concept of the suburbs was established in earnest. While it was the heyday of American manufacturing and industrial might for some; people in rural areas didn't have the same easy access as others. In a time before the interstate system, it was not as easy to get from one place to another.

My father was born, and lived the early years of his life in a small central Texas town called Wellington. He was the middle child of a family of three boys and one girl. Wellington, to this day, remains virtually untouched as a town. Almost as if it is a time capsule, the streets are made of interlocking brick to this day, and small single family homes line each street. Needless to say, my father grew up poor and at the hands of traditional man from a small central Texas background. My father describes his father as a very strict disciplinarian and a devout Baptist. He was the archetypal head of the household. As such, everybody's actions were under scrutiny. For instance, he didn't allow his wife to smoke; deeming it unladylike. My father's mother, being the strong headed southern woman she was, took to hiding her cigarettes in a linen closet, possibly the one place a man would never check at the time.

My father was not exposed too much in the way of culture living in small town central Texas. He recalls that the first television didn't show up in town until 1957. Limited in the way of opportunities and exposure to the outside world, my grandfather decided to leave Wellington and move to Los Angeles, where he was offered work as a butcher. My father recalls it was a sad day in Wellington, as the citizens lamented the loss of the only butcher in town.

The year of his relocation to Los Angeles was 1960. He started middle school that same year. This very same year, my grandfather decided he hated Los Angeles proper, and moved his family yet again, this time southeast to Santa Fe Springs. Santa Fe Springs at the time was an archetypal suburb. It proved a comfortable setting for the remainder of my father's childhood years.

The pervasive theme in America in the 1960's was uncertainty. The "Red scare" was in full effect, and my father's family was not exempt. By 1966, my father was 18, and everybody knew he was going to be drafted right after high school. He did what he felt was important to him; he graduated high school. Neither his father nor mother had graduated from high school, so it was a point of pride for their children to do so. His brother entered the Army the year prior of his own accord, he figured if he was going he was going to make it on his own terms.

Right after High school, my father opted to go to college, which he was able to do for one semester. One afternoon as he was driving home from his then girlfriend's house, he decided the same thing his older brother did. If he was going to go into the army, then he was going on his own terms. He turned around and drove straight to the recruiting office and enlisted. Following his brother, he would rather do things on his own terms.

He went straight home afterwards and told his father. To his father, not going wasn't an option. His father, fiercely patriotic, and fiercely southern; my father was going. He was the proudest he had ever been of my Father at that moment. So proud, in fact, he showed my father the greatest sign of respect imaginable: He shook his hand. Two weeks later, my grandfather drove my father to the train station to report for duty and leave for basic training. They said little, and my grandfather offered little comfort to the terrified 19 year old sitting beside him. They arrived, my grandfather offered him a congratulatory "Good luck!" and a handshake, and he was off.

My father arrived at Fort Benning, Georgia two days later. The army, he says, wouldn't help him in getting all the way to Georgia. So he took two trains, and ended up in Alabama. He hitch hiked the rest of the way to Fort Benning. He showed up dirty and tired, but on time.

Given that my father enlisted, he had his choice of what he wanted to do in the army, which is something they didn't always let draftees do. So, my father opted to become a helicopter mechanic. He went to basic training, and then afterwards went to aircraft repair school. Afterwards, he was assigned to a helicopter repair company at Fort Benning. There was, however, a slight problem with this helicopter company. They didn't have any helicopters. So my father sat around for two weeks, a newly minted private first class helicopter mechanic, who had no idea how to work on a helicopter.

It didn't take long, he says, for the Army to catch on to this. They immediately began transferring mechanics to repair units for deployment. My dad told me in the course of my brief interview, "I didn't know how to fix a helicopter, but I knew one thing: I wasn't going to Vietnam." Luck would have it; my father was one of very few

people at the time who paid attention to their high school typing class. He was reassigned to the personal service of a Colonel at Fort Benning, and man who my father says was the best person he ever met at doing nothing at all. So my father spent the next year typing memos and reports for a Colonel, and managed to become the best friend of a staff of training sergeants, for which he would pass along leave requests to the Colonel for immediate approval.

One day my father was reading memos and typing responses for his superior. He came across a memo stating that several drill sergeants were discharged for negligent conduct, and asked the Colonel to make recommendations for their replacement. My father got up, and walked into his office and said, "Recommend me for this." The Colonel replied, "Son, if I recommend you for this then I need to find another typist, and it took me three months to find you. Besides, don't you like being here?" To which my father replied, "Sir, I like being here because nobody is shooting at me." The Colonel stared at my father for a solid minute, at which time he took out a pen and piece of paper, and wrote my father a recommendation to attend drill instructor school.

My father went to drill instructor school, and was made a staff sergeant at the age of 19. Mostly, he says, out of dumb luck and because he wasn't willing to take no for an answer. Due to extreme shortage at the time of personnel, as it was still before the draft was officially called in, the Army was willing to wave the time served requirement generally for this promotion. He described himself as, "Possibly the nicest drill instructor in the history of the Army." However, in the true fashion my father is known for, if he had to punish somebody, he did it in the funniest way possible. A favorite punishment of his was requiring a soldier to dig a three foot deep foxhole. He would then tell the soldier,

“I want you to fill it back up, but I only want you to fill up the top.” As such, it wasn’t uncommon for a punished man to dig four or five foxholes a day.

In late 1968, however, he was not so lucky. He received word that his brother was killed in action. The last conversation they had was his brother calling him, “One lucky son of a bitch” for securing stateside duty. He spent the rest of his time in the Army training infantry men, drinking Georgia moonshine, and generally trying to avoid attention of any kind. His superiors tried to get him to reenlist as a drill instructor, as there was now a draft in full effect, and there was still a shortage of experienced trainers. He was 22 years old, and considered experienced, something that he says still makes no sense. He left the army that year, late 1970 or early 1971. He moved back to Los Angeles, as he had been offered a job working for the telephone company. He was hired on the merit of his service record, and on the sharpness of his speech and presentation. He promptly set about tarnishing all of that, by growing out his hair and a full beard. His boss commented to him one day, “If I had known you were going to grow that damned beard I never would have hired you.” My father spent the next few years enjoying himself, mailing boxes of junk and rotten fish to his coworkers using the bell western shipping service, and going on bicycle tours of California. In the mid 1970’s, he relocated to Santa Cruz, California, where he attended nursing school on the G.I. Bill.

He met my mother there, nine years his junior. They married in 1980, and promptly set about having children. Six children they had, all said and done. It was a loaded question then, when I asked him what he wanted for me and my future; impossible for him to answer interviewer to interviewee. From father to son, then, he said: “I just want a more comfortable life for all of you, and the freedom to do what you want.”

