

Butch Nehring: A Vietnam Veteran Story

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"We have a better future when we remember the past, learn from it, and move forward together." - John McCain, Vietnam POW

On May 26 this year, we will celebrate Memorial Day. Partially inspired by my high school daughter's weekly Advanced World History quizzes, which I'm helping prepare for, I decided to write an article about the Vietnam War. Butch Nehring, a family friend and resident of Bloomer, Wisconsin, was kind enough to talk to me about his time in the service. In 1967, as a 20-year-old studying social services at UW-Stout college, Butch was drafted, deployed and fought for nearly two years in the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War is particularly difficult for our veterans to talk about because of how they were treated by our country upon returning home and finding out Americans were so against it. Young men who are drafted agree to serve because they believe in our country and are willing to sacrifice to protect it. However, they rarely know the details of wartime decisions made by the President or generals, and they simply are trained to follow orders and protect each other.

After World War II, which generally felt like a clear fight against evil, the Vietnam War seemed confusing and distant. Also, for the first time, the war was televised. People could see the brutality on the nightly news, horrifying them, which create a credibility gap between what they saw and what the government said about how the war was going. With massive civilian casualties from bombings and chemicals like Agent Orange, people started to believe it was an unjust or even immoral war.

As hard as the war was, Butch did have some good memories with whom he describes as "his brothers." Their regular schedule would rotate between "recon" (surveying a region by foot or on the road for the enemy) and "stand-by" (waiting to be called in for back-up if the recon crew found the enemy). During this stand-by down

time, Butch and his brothers used large wooden boxes from mortars (short cannons) to build a full porch for their bunker, complete with roof and porch furniture. Butch recalled, with mischievous giggle, they tapped into the communications station's 110V electricity to add porch lights to their otherwise completely dark living area—until it caused radio issues and the lines were tested. They were also limited to two beers per day, but their first sergeant looked the other way if they exceeded that while playing cards on their homemade porch. This bonding made it horrifically traumatizing when his buddies got blown to pieces in front of his eyes, and Butch was emotional multiple times during our meeting, even while remembering good days.

The estimates vary but the overall death toll in the Vietnam War was likely somewhere between 2.5-3.5 million people including civilians and soldiers from all sides. Nearly 60,000 of those deaths were US military, with hundreds of thousands of US military wounded.

Even when offered \$8,000 and a promotion to Staff Sergeant, Butch declined a re-up. He returned home in December 1968 and proceeded to return to college. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in Speech Pathology while running the

night shift for a food processing plant in Bloomer, where he was eventually hired to be Plant Manager. He recently celebrated 50 years of marriage with his wife, Sue Nehring, and they share three kids and many grandchildren.

Even after his struggle with PTSD and losing most of his friends in the war, Butch said he would support his kids or grandkids if they were ever interested in joining the military. There are many benefits to being in the military including country pride and leadership training. Butch said, "there is risk in anything," so follow your dreams.

Thank you to all of our servicemen and women, regardless of what war you represented us in, and prayers and immense gratitude for all of those lost protecting our freedoms.

