

INTERVIEW WITH VIETNAM VETERANS

By William E. Bacon
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I recently had the opportunity to interview my uncle, Leroy Kelly, from International Falls about his service tour country in the Vietnam War. I was very honored and proud to have conducted this interview with a relative who had served our country. I learned a great deal.

Uncle Leroy was 21 years old when he was drafted into the United States Army. He served our country from June 15, 1966 until his discharge on June 14, 1968. He was a member of Operation Pershing in Vietnam, First Calvary Division.

I asked my uncle a series of questions in a recent interview about his experience in Vietnam and I received the following responses:

What did you do while in Vietnam? My uncle's civilian occupation was a field lineman. He was involved with basic communication between base camp and infantry entailing the duties of stringing wire for telephone communications and operating switchboard connecting company infantry with base camp. After leaving Vietnam, the balance of his tour was being stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado, performing carpentry and building duties as assigned until finishing his tour of duty.

What was Vietnam like? It was sort of desolate and primitive with a lot of monsoon type weather.

What hardships did you face? My uncle said that he really had no hardships during his service. He thought he was well taken care of.

How did the war affect you? Leroy said he became a more mature adult and accepted his responsibilities without question. He was proud to serve our country in any way that he could.

When you came back, was there anything different and how was it different? Unlike today, Leroy said he knew he would not be drafted again and was happy to be home. Things were not a whole lot different at home in International Falls, but he said there was a lot of protesting going on all over the country which he was not involved with.

Were you emotionally hurt and how? Leroy responded by saying that he had no ill effects from his service in Vietnam. He did not sustain any injuries while serving. He did not have any ill feelings toward our country and has not suffered emotionally in subsequent years. After it was all over, he was glad to be home and just "let things be".

Were you scared? Leroy said that he was more concerned than scared. The fear of the unknown created some concern.

What did the Vietnam War teach you? When called upon to serve our country, Leroy said that he did so without question. A person does not question things like that at such a young age and you do as you are told. However, when reflecting back over the past 37 years or so, he has learned a lot about our purpose and reasons for the war. Although this war was considered long and controversial and a war that we did not win, lessons are always learned. First and foremost, we must never forget those that served, were injured, or lost their lives for this country. At the time, the government thought they were doing the right thing and were in the middle of a very difficult situation. Leroy said he learned to persevere and become a responsible adult. He learned to work with others to try to bring a positive result and also do the very best job he could and carry out his responsibilities.

Did you receive any medals? My Uncle Leroy received the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service with Bronze Service Star, the Vietnam Campaign Medal and Army Commendation Medal.

Have you been in contact with any Vietnam Veterans? Not those he served with. However, locally, yes. Also Leroy is Senior Vice Commander of VFW Peter Graham Post #2948,

International Falls. He is a member of the Color Guard and does volunteer work locally. He was instrumental with helping with the Moving Wall and setting up guards for it.

Have you ever visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.? NO. However, recently the Moving Wall was brought to International Falls in July 2007. It was a very moving experience for Leroy as well as our whole town. It was quite an impressive memorial, a memorial that every United State citizen should see.

Would you like to return to Vietnam as a visitor and why? When specifically asked if he would like to return to Vietnam as a visitor, Uncle Leroy responded by saying no. He really had no desire to return to Vietnam. He said he had witnessed and experienced enough. There were no unresolved issues for him. However, he said it would be interesting to see how the country may have changed in the last 37 years. He was very glad to return home and to have proudly served his country along with thousands of others.

What are your personal feelings about the Vietnam War? My uncle stated he really did not think we solved anything in the Vietnam War. He understood the whole purpose was to prevent the spread of Communism and everyone was trying to do the right thing. But it was like going up stream without a paddle and we really did not resolve anything. However, he did not feel it was a waste of his life. **More importantly, he felt it was an experience that few people were allowed to have and he is very proud of that.**

In closing, while speaking with my uncle, I learned a lot about Vietnam. It helped me understand more about the war and how difficult it was on the soldiers. I feel my uncle is a very courageous man and I have a great deal of respect for his as well as thousands of others who have served our country to maintain the freedoms we have. We must never ever take any of this for granted.