

To the Northland Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation:

I am choosing to write this essay in honor of my grandfather Paul Cramer. He was drafted into the U.S. Army for the Vietnam War in 1970 at the young age of eighteen. He was awarded five medals and received an honorable discharge.

During his time in Vietnam, while on patrol, my grandfather's platoon was doused with Agent Orange by U.S. helicopters which were unknowingly emptying their tanks over their own troops before returning to base. Because of this, almost everyone in my grandfather's platoon died within two to four years of this incident. My grandfather was told when he was 23 that he had between six and nine months to live. He lived thirty-six more years having fifty-two surgeries performed on him before he passed away this past February at the age of fifty-nine.

I was lucky enough to learn a lot from my grandfather as he would often talk to me about his experiences in the war. After returning home from the war, he had to tolerate ridicule and insults coming from many American civilians. Like many Vietnam vets he also faced the hardship of convincing the U.S. government that many combat soldiers had been exposed to large amounts of Agent Orange, and that they deserved the appropriate medical treatment, which he was able to take advantage of later in life. His many surgeries were in some way linked to his exposure to Agent Orange.

What makes me the most proud of my grandfather is that, despite all these hardships, he was never bitter. He was very patriotic and possessed a great love for his country and was proud of his service as a vet. I never heard him complain about what happened to him.

My grandfather said he believed that many Americans and government officials learned a lot from the Vietnam War, which led them to treat other veterans from more recent wars with more dignity and respect. He thought that the construction of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. was very important in not only allowing himself and other Vietnam veterans to heal, but this attitude of respect was passed forward to vets from more recent wars. He loved that memorial.

My grandfather believed that our government could and should do more to support our veterans returning from war, especially in providing medical care for mental health issues. He had a hard time with the high rate of suicide with today's veterans returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He did not have a problem with parades or statues honoring vets, but he always thought that more attention should be directed toward providing adequate health services and aiding veterans in their search to find good employment.

In keeping the memory of my grandfather Paul Cramer in our hearts, my family will celebrate his life and service to his country with a full military ceremony over the Fourth of July this summer in Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Trevor Laroche-Theune
2011/2012