

Payton Caldwell

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Claude Hurst, Jr.

“War is not like the movies. I was pretty naïve about it before I got there. I realized quickly that the good veterans from back home didn’t talk about the gory part because they’d been through some stuff. The bad ones talked about it because they hadn’t...” – Claude Hurst, Jr.

For Claude Hurst, Jr., a long-time resident of small-town Ceredo, West Virginia, there is only one goal that he feels he has left to accomplish in his lifetime: staying as busy as possible. As a recently retired Special Education teacher and former Delivery Supervisor at the Huntington Nickel Plant for 35 years, a dedicated husband for over 50 years and father to three daughters, a grandfather to six grandchildren, and an active writer and public speaker for almost 20 years, Claude has never experienced a dull day in his life. Before participating in the “family life” as he calls it, however, Claude’s days were spent preparing for and engaging in arguably one of the worst wars the United States has ever fought: Vietnam. His story is one that is both eye-opening and amusing, as he highlights his inability to initially understand the disaster and horror associated with war, the anxiety stemming from being shot at “almost all the time,” and, on the other hand, his experiences with “strange guys from strange places” and rancid rations from 1945. In Claude’s eyes, Vietnam was not just a life changing moment for him, but for the United States as a whole. It is why he has continued to return to these moments even years later to share his story so that others can understand the devastation and unionization of war.

Being from a small-town with nothing to do, Claude never saw himself as a stand-out guy. As a young boy, he notes that he only had two goals: finishing school despite his poor grades and chasing girls, “even the ones who didn’t want me.” His quiet demeanor and ghost-like presence in school and in the community made him feel as if he were “just a normal guy.”

“I was a quiet kid. Didn’t get into much. Ran track, said I was in 4H Club but never attended the meetings, went to school. That’s about it.”

After graduating from Ceredo Kenova High School in 1966, Claude determined it would be nearly impossible for him to attend college, even community college, because of his G.P.A. Feeling the pressure from his parents and possessing an unconscious desire to succeed, he knew it was time to search for plan B. Jobs during this period in the United States were difficult to find, leaving him in a tough situation. It was only after having conversations with friends and their fathers, former Marines, that Claude realized enlisting in the ongoing conflict with Vietnam would be his best option. When asked about his parents’ initial concerns that their only son would be heading overseas to take part in a deadly war, he notes that they “packed my bags and put them on the porch and said go get them.” The support from his parents, according to him, only added to the naïveté that he and his friends suffered from at this time surrounding war as a whole; it made the process of enlisting an exciting one. For Claude, war was the equivalent to adventure. Vietnam wasn’t going to be a life or death situation. It would be a new place with new people, a time to “think and get away.” Claude’s naïveté, unfortunately, was quickly erased.

After eight weeks of training, Claude was shipped off to Camp Pendleton in California for a second round before he would be able to travel overseas and join other troops.

“They wear you out there. It was rough.”

Despite suffering from physical and even mental exhaustion, however, he notes that training was an experience he will never forget; specifically, shooting a flame thrower and firing hundreds of weapons allowed his naïveté and excitement to return. Boot camp was challenging, but easy. Fun. Getting shipped off to Hill 55 in Vietnam, though, was a different story.

For Hurst, tank operation and mechanical work was a “tough job but fun.” The once quiet boy had now become an overconfident man, even citing that driving a tank was “no big deal” when asked by his officers how he felt about his role. He never felt homesick, either~ the hills of Vietnam were similar to the hills back in West Virginia. Essentially, he didn’t have time to miss the familiarity of small-town life. Claude did begin to grow angry when he learned that his fellow troops and even some of his officers were indirectly targeting him after he revealed he was a native West Virginian. He specifically cites an example of an encounter with an officer as he was practicing driving a tank.

“He said Hurst, it should be just like being in a coal mine. Heck, I’d never even been in a coal mine. Most guys didn’t even know West Virginia was a state. They only thought of coal mines, hillbillies, and one leg being shorter than the other because of the hills.”

Being part of a diverse group of troops, most notably from across both coasts across the U.S., Claude was frustrated that his men used his home state against him. This ultimately, as he points out, became a turning point, allowing him to shed his naïveté. Fun times were over. Instead, he felt misunderstood and isolated from everyone around him. That would change, however, when monsoon season would swing into full effect.

“The mud was four feet deep. Weather was horrible. We knew there was a real war going on at this point.”

Following his time at Hill 55, Claude was transported to what he calls the “Dead Marine Zone” in DMZ territory between North and South Vietnam. “Soldiers were wounded here all the time and half of them didn’t know what happened to them. It was horrible stuff.” Despite the heavy rain, mud-soaked trenches, and the horrors that surrounded him, Claude was able to bring a past hobby to life- he and his fellow troops began spending free time playing guitar and singing 60s rock songs. He cites his father as his inspiration for choosing to pick up an instrument.

“My dad could really play anything with a string. I could only play the guitar. Still can only play the guitar.”

The guitar became Claude’s close companion during the war, and also became the glue that held he and his fellow troops together during the toughest days of combat. When the “real war,” as he calls it, wasn’t occurring, rock songs and card games were everyone’s favored leisure activities.

“Most rations dated back to years like 1945. The meals were awful.”

On his 19th birthday, Claude was once again reminded of the harsh reality of war. There were no balloons, or a nice cake baked by his mother, no family to sing him happy birthday and keep him company in the now freezing rain; his only presents were the looming threat of the DMZ, and a ration from 1945 full of spoiled ham and lima beans. The memory of this birthday still remains fresh in Claude’s mind as one detail that made him fully understand the disparity between war portrayed in the movies versus real-life, where spoiled rations, flying bullets, and fear actually did exist.

“The smell of burning flesh is something that sticks with you. It never goes away after the war...”

Because he is from West Virginia, Vietnam was not the only tragedy that has occurred in Claude's life. In 1970, the Marshall University Football Team was traveling back to Huntington, West Virginia, by airplane after a loss to conference rival East Carolina; the plane, carrying the entire team, the coaching staff, fans, and boosters, crashed into the hillside on Route 75 in Kenova, West Virginia, killing all 75 passengers on board. Claude recalls the night of the crash, citing it as something he'll never forget. Just three hours before the tragedy, he and his wife, Marvine, were driving on Route 75. Claude, who at the time was just beginning to display signs of PTSD, says that he told his wife that he smelled burning flesh near the eventual crash site. "I'm not a prophet, but that was some scary stuff," he claims.

At this point in his life, Claude had decided to attend college to pursue a degree in education. As a student at Marshall during this devastating period, he remembers being "bothered" by so much death and destruction, and notes that the entire Tri-State Area was deeply affected by the loss. When asked about being a student at the university during the rebuilding process, which consisted of finding an entire roster and new coaching staff for the football team, Claude says that it was difficult to see the school and town in shambles. Ultimately, the lingering effects of Vietnam were still a heavy presence in Claude's everyday life.

"My first published piece was a collection of short stories in a book called Adventures in Hell: Volume I. I like to tell people that was about my marriage. Just kidding."

Although entering into the school system as a teacher became Claude's full-time profession, the guitar was no longer his only hobby. In order to cope with the drastic side effects of the PTSD that often crippled him, Claude turned to writing, and notes that it was an extremely therapeutic process. What started as just words on paper became short stories in a popular collection of war stories, followed by his own book: *The Ravings and Savings of a Vietnam*

Veteran. The first part of his book, mostly consisting of poetry and war songs, was a way for him to reminisce on his time as a member of one of America's worst conflicts. The second part of his book, however, incorporated another element of his life that has had a profound impact on the man he is today: religion. Claude chose to add religious songs and poems into his book, citing that it was "important" to let this part of himself shine through. As a consistent church attendee and a performer at the Veterans Chapel, religion at times has been what has kept Claude going despite the devastation he experienced. When asked if there are any current projects he is working on, Claude mentions that he has enough material now to write a much bigger book, but that it is an ongoing process.

"There is collateral damage in any war. But we were already in it, so why not finish it?"

Claude's first-hand experience in the depths of Vietnam has not only played a role in who he is today but has also given him the opportunity to share his story and impact others, veterans and average citizens alike. Each year, Claude attends a speaking event at Marshall University, where he discusses his experience and perspective on war; the event is sponsored by two women who are determined to always give veterans a platform to share their stories. However, the respect that veterans like Claude receive today has not always been the case. Claude recalls that one of his biggest takeaways from Vietnam was the poor treatment of soldiers like himself upon their return to the United States. He notes that many people viewed the soldiers as "criminals," even going as far as to say that some hated the soldiers for "killing babies." "Nobody wanted to talk about it when we were back." The biggest takeaway, though, lies with the news media. Claude mentions that the news coverage of the war then was astounding, but that the news today is all about "opinion." He believes that the news should strictly be facts, and that now more than ever people should respect one another. Ultimately, Claude's perspective on Vietnam, despite

being involved directly in the fight, remains the same. He believes that, despite popular opinion, regardless of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, the United States still would have remained in Vietnam. For Claude? The fight had already begun. All there was left was to finish it.

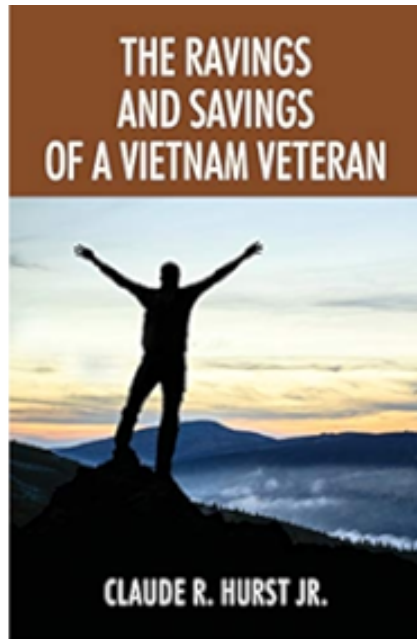
Claude's story and insight is one that gives audiences full disclosure and brutal honesty regarding the war, small-town life, prejudice, and the power of the written word. He is an exceptional example of a veteran who not only dedicated his life to service but has also dedicated his life to ensuring that those unable to tell their stories are never forgotten.



Old Ceredo Kenova High School:
Claude's playground before Vietnam



The Marshall University 1970 Plane Crash Memorial Site on Route 75 in Kenova, WV. Claude recalled smelling burnt flesh in this exact spot hours before the crash.



Claude's first full book, *The Ravings and Savings of a Vietnam Veteran* can be purchased on Amazon



Claude Hurst, Jr.