

## **One Day, There Was a Letter**

Specialist Jon Paul May's story is one of the thousands that is not often told solely because it is not one that is filled with battles and bullets. He served in the United States Army for three years during the Vietnam War as a clerk typist. However, this does not mean that Jon's service to his country was any less crucial to America's military success than those on the front lines. There is an old army saying that goes something like this, "for every one man on the front lines, there are ten men behind him making sure he's able to be there." Jon was one of those ten men, and he is one of the thousands of unsung heroes of America's armed forces.

Jon was born on July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1944, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He and his two brothers along with their mother and father lived there until Jon was in the middle of his ninth grade year, when his family moved to Saint Louis Park, Minnesota. While, in reality, the two cities are less than 10 miles apart, Jon distinctly remembers how, at the time, the distance from Minneapolis to Saint Louis Park seemed to be so far. He remembered that it seemed "a lifetime away if you're a ninth grader and all you can do is walk somewhere!" He left all of his friends behind and described the experience as a "brand new awakening."

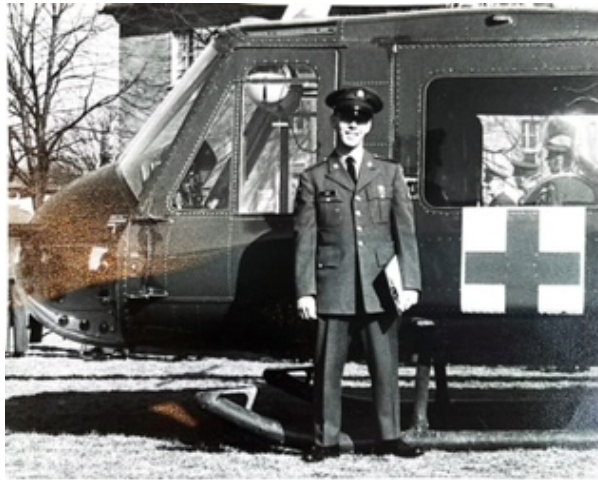
He spent the rest of his early life in Saint Louis Park and then went to study at the University of Minnesota for several years. Jon never had any aspirations to join the military despite his father's having served in World War II with the Army Air Corps in Guam. Jon never heard any stories about his father's time in the Army, so it had no impact on his desire to join a military life or career path. Jon and his wife had just been married when President Johnson decided that married men were no longer excluded from the draft. Shortly after, he received his draft notice from the United States Army in 1966. This news led him to the decision to join the Army on his own terms: "I wanted to take the bull by the horns: I enlisted."

The whirlwind of emotions he felt after this news amidst the Vietnam War prompted him to take the power back and regain some control over his situation. Reflecting on the decision, he explained, “It’s not something I wanted to do, But I’m an American and I believe we should stand up for our world. And I didn’t want to be drafted and be sent willy-nilly somewhere beyond my control. So, I decided I’m going to enlist.” He then went on to attend Basic Training at Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri, when he was 21 years old. When speaking about this time, he said, “everybody at the basic training company at Fort Leonard-Wood, Missouri, was 18 to 19 years old, and I think we had a couple special permission 17-year-olds. Everybody was that age except for me—I was 21. And I was literally referred to as the old man.” He remembers thoroughly enjoying his training with the M16 rifle, saying, “I got a big kick out of shooting.” He added that “I wasn’t a big fan of CS gas. Tear gas is something that if I smell it again, I’m gone.” This, he says, was the worst part of his training.

Towards the end of Jon’s training, he was called upon to be the first trainee in his company to throw a live hand grenade. He said, “I was very, very impressed by hand grenades.” Jon talked about how he was placed in the bunker with a sergeant who calmly explained how to employ it, and Jon noted that “I think he got pretty comfortable with the fact that I wasn’t going to be an idiot and do something stupid.” He then says, “That is probably the most powerful thing I’ve ever held in my hands, and it made a heck of a bang. I don’t need another one of those.” During his time in Basic Training, he began to form a philosophy that would follow him through the rest of his military career and life. That philosophy was born of the advice he had been given prior to beginning training: “Do what is necessary to the best of your ability.”

After graduation, he moved on to Advanced Training to become a clerk typist. Upon completing Advanced Training, his company was transferred to APO San Francisco, which at the

time meant that he was going to Vietnam. After receiving this news, Jon was hesitant to tell his wife as he knew it was not something she wanted to hear, nor was it something he ever wanted to have to tell her. Much to his surprise, however, Jon May and his company were being sent to Europe. He was going to be assigned to the 7<sup>th</sup> Medical Brigade HQ in Ludwigsburg, Germany.



*Jon May with a 7<sup>th</sup> Medical Brigade helicopter in Ludwigsburg, Germany (24 February 1967)*

Following this announcement, he notes that there was a celebration, recalling that “all of a sudden, there was a lot of beer flowing among my compatriots.” A year after he arrived, his wife joined him in Germany on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967. She returned to the United States with their 13-month-old son, born in Bad Cannstatt, Germany, on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1969. Jon served as a clerk typist under Colonel Clell J. Windham for three years until he retired as a Specialist. Looking back on his days in the United States Army, Jon described his time in service as “an experience that I wouldn’t trade for anything.”