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**William “Buddy” Herndon: A Story of Survival and Faith**



I had the absolute pleasure of interviewing my grandpa, William “Buddy” Herndon, who chose to enlist rather than be drafted into the Army during the peak of the Vietnam War. At just 19 years old, he served from March 1969 to March 1970 as part of an attack helicopter unit maintenance team. Buddy understands the sacrifices and struggles of war; nightmares and developed habits from his experience (always sitting facing the door in restaurants, ceaselessly checking his surroundings, sleeping with a gun in his nightstand, etc.) were part of his daily life

until he became a Christian at age 26, and he has never looked back, ever focused on moving forward. Buddy is a man of steadfast faith, and his story is one of survival, mental fortitude, and unwavering positivity.

After Buddy completed one semester at Wingate University, his father had to borrow money for the second semester. Buddy knew he would be drafted eventually, so he enlisted in order to avoid having his father be in debt. Enlisting meant he could also have more of a choice in what he did while he was in the Army, although he jokes he should have picked the Air Force because the food was better. Buddy attended basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, which took place during the hottest time of the year—from May through August. One of the few memories he had of basic was from one of the first days they were there: a cesspool had been dredged, spread around the grass as fertilizer, and they were made to walk over the stuff with their new boots. He says that the heat and the physical demands were just a part of the weeding out process. After completing basic, Buddy was sent to Fort Lee, Virginia, for Advanced Individual Training (AIT) and was promoted to the rank of E-4 upon completion of his training. While serving in Vietnam, he was promoted to E-5.

Surprisingly, when it came time to leave the U.S. and begin his deployment to Vietnam, he wasn't nervous at all. However, Buddy choked up when he told me that the most emotional pain he had ever felt was getting on the plane and leaving his pregnant wife standing at the airport in Asheville, North Carolina. What he feared was the unknown. He arrived in the northern region of South Vietnam at Landing Zone (LZ) Sally in March 1969, right in the middle of monsoon season. "It was so hot the first two weeks, all we were required to do was sit around and adapt so we wouldn't die. The humidity was like walking into a steam bath and you couldn't get out of it," he recounted. Trapped in a small clearing for helicopter landings between the

mountains and the ocean, there was nowhere to go. Buddy explained that it felt like being in a prison, and he would have rather been in an actual prison in the U.S. because at least there you'd get better food and no one would be shooting at you.

When I asked him if he saw combat, he explained that because they worked on an LZ, which is an open area for aircraft landings, they were like sitting ducks to be shot at. He discussed what it was like working on the LZ, rather than the jungle:

Where we were on the LZ, I'll put it this way. My 20th birthday was my first Saturday in Vietnam, and I had perimeter guard out in the bunkers. In that bunker, you have grenade launchers and M-16's, and we got hit with rockets. That was my 20th birthday, which I'll never forget. Obviously there's stuff blowing up, people get killed. That's what war is.

While in Vietnam, Buddy stayed in "hootches," living quarters made of a tin roof that had sandbags all around the bottom and a screen to keep out the mosquitos. Late one night during an attack, Buddy discovered that an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) had gone right through the hootch, over his sleeping bag, and lodged in the bunker outside just a few feet away. Thankfully, it was a dud.

Buddy described the war as, "the worst of humanity, people killing each other. A lot of these people we were fighting against, if we met them now, we'd probably be friends. But because government heads say we have to go to war and kill each other that's what we do. It's



insanity. But that's the evil that exists in mankind." To him, no one truly wins a war—one side just loses worse than the other.

Daily life in Vietnam was brutal. The food was so bad that when Buddy first arrived he weighed 190 pounds at 6'0", and when he came back he weighed 145. They ate powdered eggs, rice that would sometimes have maggots in it, and other food that was dehydrated—even fish that would swell up like a sponge when you tossed it in water. There was nothing to drink except warm water from the swamp that had been "purified" and flavored with lime Kool-Aid, which Buddy still can't stand the taste of today.

When they had perimeter guard, they worked all day and stood guard all night long, only getting two hours of sleep. Then, they'd get up and get back to it the next day. The only way they could really stay awake was by putting coffee grounds in a steel pot and boiling the water—it was nasty, but it helped them stay awake. Whenever they did get to sleep, they would wake up with their eyelids and lips

swollen from mosquito bites. They put insect repellent on any bit of skin that was uncovered, but couldn't put it on their eyes or lips. Buddy said that all you lived for was the arrival of the mail chopper each day. It didn't matter how old the letter was, it was just a much-needed connection to home. After 50 years of marriage, his wife and my grandma, Donna, has still saved all the letters that he sent her. Buddy also carried a calendar of all 12 months that he kept rolled up under his sleeping bag, and every morning he'd wake up and cross off the previous day. "It was



like 365 12-hour Mondays in a row. There was nothing else. Nowhere to go, nothing to do, no entertainment.”

There was one night, though, when the Red Cross brought in a movie projector and screen and played Clint Eastwood’s *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, which is a Western film filled with killing. “We’re sitting there watching a Western about killing, and the whole time we’re watching tracer rounds outside the perimeter where firefights were going on. We see rounds come from helicopters in the mountain range. So we’re sitting there in the middle of a war, you see it going on around you and then you see Clint Eastwood kill people.”

When new soldiers came in, he explained, they were called cherries because they were “so soft,” and anyone who had already been there was mentally and emotionally hardened. They had just gotten a new group on the night they played the movie, and one guy started rolling around, screaming. He had a nervous breakdown and had to be sent back home: “Think about it. He just came from the States, you’re watching Clint Eastwood killing people on the screen in the middle of a war, and everyone is watching it like nothing’s going on.” Buddy talked about the contrast between himself and the new



guys who he said were “just normal.” He didn’t realize that he had gradually hardened until he compared himself to them. “You ask yourself why you don’t feel anything,” he said, shedding light on why it was difficult to adjust when you went back home. He said, “It was a way of life. When you’ve been there for six months it’s like everything prior to that is just a faint dream. The

only people I could remember were my immediate family, my wife and her parents. I couldn't remember anybody I went to high school with, I couldn't tell you names. It's like you've always been there, you're always going to be there, and there's never going to be anything else. But you always had that hope."

Buddy said that his most joyful moment in Vietnam was when he woke up one morning and thought they were leaving the next day, but were then told they had orders to leave that day instead. He packed up his stuff and got on a helicopter to Da Nang, then got on an airplane back to the U.S. He said that no one knew each other, but "the instant the wheels lifted off the ground, there was spontaneous cheering. We didn't know each other, but we made it." Once they got home, everyone scattered.

Buddy finally made it back home, but having to face the protests and the horribly negative attitude that Americans had toward the Vietnam War and its soldiers wasn't the homecoming he'd been hoping for. He said that the protesters attacked the soldiers like they had done something wrong when really they had just done what they were ordered to do.

"Most of us came back and it was 'Ok, I'm not in



the service anymore. I'm a student here at NC State.' I went to school on the GI Bill, but nobody knew that. You don't talk about it, you don't tell anybody—you just go on with your business."

He said that the media made it look like all Vietnam veterans were under a bridge homeless, but that was not the case. Most went to school, started businesses, and just didn't talk about it. I asked if it was hard to go back home to face the protests, but he said that you were just glad that

you survived and were done with it. It's just the way it was; they had already adjusted and had thick skins anyway.

What Buddy spoke the most about in our interview wasn't necessarily what happened while he was in Vietnam, but the after-effects of his experience. He blocked it out of his mind for decades. He remembers the guys whom he worked with, but he has intentionally chosen not to contact them. Years later, his friend, a retired Marine major, took all of his things from Vietnam, such as his Bronze Star, combat ribbon, and Vietnam service ribbon, and put it in a frame for him. However, Buddy kept it hidden in a closet for a year. He felt guilty putting it out because he lived while so many others didn't. "I lived. So those things didn't mean anything to me. I lived and that's all that mattered. We went over as a unit and not everyone came home—20, 21 years old. They didn't get to live a life and I did. So who am I to have that?" Today though, he has the frame hanging in his exercise room where no one sees it but him simply out of respect for the friend who put it together.

When I asked him how he got through it all, he had a simple answer—God. Everything changed for him when he became a Christian at age 26. The nightmares he'd had for ten years stopped around age 30, and "that's when I began to have actual feelings and emotions again that were good. It's a lifelong process of growing in Christ." Buddy said that it changed his whole perspective: "I have a big picture mind anyhow, so I look at it that way: what's going on in the world, what's going on throughout history. It's nothing new. It's a cycle. Every generation makes the same mistakes as the one before. Wars, rumors of wars as the Bible talks about. It goes on and on—as long as this earth is still spinning and there's people on it, it's going to continue. But that set me free from all the pain and agony; set me free mainly from myself because I thought I was stuck with who I was, but I learned that I can change."

Buddy has taken his negative experiences in Vietnam and turned them into something positive. He is joyful that he survived and hopes that his life has had a significant impact on others because he believes that's where real joy comes from. Using everything he endured as a frame of reference helps him to be grateful for where he is now, and to keep in mind that no matter what your circumstances are, you can experience the joy that comes from God. "It was no fun. It was a difficult experience. It changes you forever. Some ways are good, some are not so good—you have to work on those for the rest of your life. I did my time, that's behind me. This point on is brand new, I'm moving forward. And I don't look back."

