

On Veterans Day we remember the men and women who have served our country in the military. Below is a reflection of one soldier who served in one war. It sensitizes us to the challenges faced by young men and women who serve anywhere in war. We are grateful to all who are serving or have served our country in times of war and times of peace.

The author, our parishioner Rich Wangard, served in US Air Force from 1968-1972. He did three tours in Vietnam between May, 1969 to August, 1970. This is an excerpt from his article published in Veterans Voices.

A Reflection on Service during War

"I was Air Force; I was only 17 when I entered the military. I worked on C-130A aircraft. I just couldn't help fast enough. My biggest fear over in 'Nam: not being able to help fast enough. All of us in my squadron were volunteers. We did not have to be in 'Nam. We did not have to fly. We were all there though and we flew. We considered ourselves helpers—not warriors or even soldiers—just proud airmen helpers.

We resupplied the troops and got the wounded to major hospitals. We got the fallen home. Our C-130As were magnificent aircraft and real workhorses. They shook off insult after insult as well as the terrible abuse the air crews dished out. They were not built or intended to do air assault take off and landings 10 to 20 times a day. They were not built to be overloaded and filled with holes from enemy guns. There was no defense other than the pilot's unheralded bravery and skill in keeping his plane in the air. We flew slow and low, an easy target. That was how we supplied the troops on the ground. Fuel, food, medicine, ammo—you name it—we flew it.

The hardest though was taking care of the wounded. That took a toll on us "helpers." Worse than the wounded was handling body bags. Yet, I've never met a 'Nam vet who said he would not do it all over again. We all would do it again. Why is that?

I would work my shift on the flight line fixing engines for 10 hours, and then as often as three times a week, I'd follow up my mechanic shift flying as an extra crew member. I'd pick up my tool box and look for an aircraft headed out on various missions. Many times we didn't even know where we were because we landed and took off so many times during just one mission.

I put in long, long hours and I think shortly after my twentieth birthday, my body and mind just quit functioning normally. I had done too much, seen too much... The war took a real toll on me. To this day I still feel embarrassed about it. I didn't finish the job I set out to do. I felt like I had failed. Trying to fit back into society was hard because 'Nam vets were so stigmatized by this country. I love being with my 'Nam brothers because we understand each other. We take care of each other—still, after all these years."

We're welcoming home heroes. So start with a thank you. But go a step further. Get to know the man or woman behind the uniform. Forge an alliance. It's not about you—it's about the connection the two of you are making. And it doesn't have to be focused on their service. Your conversation is one of hundreds, maybe thousands of small, kind gestures that, over a lifetime, can make the difference for each veteran.

-Advice from Mission 22 at mission22.com whose purpose is to raise awareness, enlist support, and end veteran suicide in America



A Reflection on Daily Living after Returning from War

“There is a story that needs to be told in this nation. The subject is tough and very difficult to write about and very personal to me. Thousands of us vets suffer long term problems from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Our memories from war cannot be erased and most all of us need lifelong help with counseling, medications, and mental health support. I am 66 now and I still counsel to this day and am not ashamed about it. Many of us isolate ourselves and refuse to leave ‘our safe perimeter’. If you would count all the Vietnam vets who have committed suicide you would have to build two more of our walls to put their names into black polished granite. And you know what—they deserve their names to be recognized. They just could not cope anymore with their lifelong haunting horrors in their minds.

The VA reports that each day about 20 of our veterans commit suicide and today 22% of all Afghanistan vets coming home are facing PTSD problems. To many people, Veterans Day is just another day on the calendar but to those of us who lost friends and fought, it is a time of reflection and can lead to a deep depression. It is a tough day for me!! I always make contact with people I served with and we talk at length about the heroes that we know who never made it home.

People now welcome us home and thank us for our service. You can’t possibly imagine how much that means to me because when we came home we were despised and discriminated against. People hated us! Nobody would hire us and we had to hide our service records. It was really bad and a black eye on our nation!!

I get by with the extreme help of my wife who has dealt with my issues for 42 years. That and the VA outpatient clinic is always there for me 24/7 and I take full advantage of their help. I am 100% service connected for PTSD and the problems, issues and symptoms of this I would not wish on my worst enemy. My PTSD can trigger at the drop of a dime and once that happens I go into panic mode, need to escape, find safety, hide and become angry, very irritable and defensive.

I have come a long way but there is no way to erase the memory banks in my mind. I wish there was but I do cope now whereas for a very long time I could not.”

-Richard Wangard
SGT.-USAF-RET. 834th DET 1 PACAF

Places where you can learn more and how to help—

+ mission22.com

+ TED talk by Wes Moore on “How to Speak to Veterans about War” at mission22.com

+ Veterans’ Voices magazine at veteransvoices.org

+ foxvalleyveteranscouncil.org

+ a veteran musician at jasonmoon.org