



## A Tribute to Our Veterans

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**I give thanks to our veterans who served our country this Memorial Day weekend. Protecting our freedoms has never been free, and many of our brave servicemen and women have paid dearly so that we can live free. Mere words can never express the gratitude which we owe them.**

**My personal journey:** I never served in the U.S. Armed Forces. The Vietnam War (or “conflict” as it was called because Congress never declared war) was ongoing as I graduated from high school in 1967. I endured harassment from the anti-war Students for Democrat Society while at Michigan State University while I was enrolled in Army Reserve Officer Training Corp my freshman year. I chose to drop ROTC after my first year, as it was taking many hours per week for a single credit per term. I thought that if I would only concentrate on my studies, I could always apply for Officer Training School as I neared graduation.

My college years were the years with student deferments and the draft lottery. I recall vividly sitting in the dorm lounge area with hundreds of other students as the lottery numbers were announced, one by one, by birth date. My number was 144, neither a “sure draftee” nor a “safe” number.

I diligently pursued my studies, and was able to graduate from MSU in three years and a summer term in 1970. By the spring of 1970, my plans had firmed up to enroll in a Ph.D. program in Agricultural Economics at the University of California, Davis in the fall of 1970, immediately after marrying my fiancé on September 19.

In the summer of 1970, I reported to my county draft board in the Upper Peninsula that I would complete my undergraduate work in early September. As fast as the mails could go back and forth, I received my notice that I had been reclassified 1A. The following day, I received my notice to report for a physical. I telephoned my draft board to learn the likelihood of being drafted based on my draft number, and was told that I would likely be called to service that December.

Because the scheduled physical date coincided with the days Linda and I would be traveling to California, I requested a change of location for the physical, which I received. I was to report for the physical in Oakland, California shortly after my arrival in California.

Meanwhile, I went to an optometrist in East Lansing to get a new pair of glasses. As I was departing the optometrist’s office with my new glasses, the optometrist said, “By the way, did you know that your correction for near sightedness is too great to past the Army physical?” He gave me a written

prescription to take with me to the physical. A second opinion from a California optometrist confirmed the prescription.

At the physical in Oakland in October, 1970, after a morning of test after test, I presented my prescriptions at the eye exam area, underwent a quick confirmation by the doctors there and was excused from the remainder of the exams. I was shortly thereafter reclassified as unfit for service. I was obviously relieved, as getting drafted to serve in Vietnam was not anyone's dream in those days, especially when I had just started grad school and gotten married.

As the years passed, and the war's toll on my friends and acquaintances became apparent, I began to feel guilty. Many did not return from Vietnam alive, and many others returned with drug addictions and/or wounds – both physical and psychological. In part, my remorse was based on my belief that I would have been better prepared to serve than most who did, yet I was protected and they were not. I had hunted, fished, played basketball and roamed the woods extensively as a youth. I played basketball and soccer, backpacked, cross country skied and climbed mountains while in graduate school. In short, I was in great physical shape. I had learned mental toughness from my widowed mom. I had placed first among my group in the ROTC freshman rifle competition. Yet I was spared while others were not. That simply was not fair, and I felt guilty because I had benefited from that unfairness. Fortunately, the guilty feeling lessened over the years as the Vietnam era faded into memory, but the feeling still lingers when I think about it in days of remembrances such as these.

**Many others - men, women and children - have not served during the Vietnam era, or any of our other wars or conflicts, for that matter. We who have been spared owe a terrific debt of gratitude for those who have.**

**Special Tribute To:**

- My dad, Alfred Olson, who served in World War I in France – “Lafayette, We Remember”
- My wife's dad, Gerald Ruckle, who served in World War II, in the awful island hopping in the Pacific. He suffered nightmares until the day he died on my birthday in 1971.
- My brother, Jim, who served as a medic during the Vietnam Era, fortunately all stateside
- Our son, Kirk, who served 10 years in the U.S. Navy, as a nuclear electrician
- My high school buddy, David Paavola, who served valiantly in Vietnam and lives to NOT talk about it.
- Our brave young men and women who currently voluntarily serve our country all around the world, preserving our safety and our freedoms. Few will forget the images we saw on 9-11-2001 and the days following, or forget that we still live in an unsafe world, where people are willing to martyr themselves to destroy our way of life.

# Thank you!