

The Story of John Koch

At first glance, many see soldiers as insignificant people who have served their country, They are sorely mistaken, for as they take them for granted, they do not understand the obstacles and pain war veterans must overcome. These honorable soldiers have suffered for the sake of our country. Some of them, whether they wanted to join the military or not. As an Army veteran, John Koch still has a vivid memory of his miserable wartime experiences.

Koch's story began with the Vietnam War and the Mekong River. Boats manned by about six Navy sailors would transport approximately thirty Army soldiers up and down the river. When the boats were ambushed, and after the initial firefight, the soldiers would be left off at the edge of the jungle to pursue and engage the remaining enemy. At other times, Koch's unit would be dropped off into rice paddies by helicopter to hunt for the enemy. In his Company of about 100 soldiers, 26 were killed or drowned during the time he spent in Vietnam.

Ultimately he felt it wasn't the Vietnamese's fault. The Americans were invading their territory even though there was no possible way for the Vietnamese to invade America. So what was all this for? Absolutely nothing! John apologized even though he shouldn't have. He had no control over the war; he shouldn't have even been in the war. But John Koch didn't apologize for himself; he apologized for our government actions toward the Vietnamese people, even when the government forced something immeasurable on him. What a valiant and patriotic action that was.

In April, 1965, when he was twenty-one years old and two weeks before his pre-planned wedding, John Koch received his draft notice. He was deferred and received a second draft notice almost three years later in 1968. The government was then drafting married men without kids.

John Koch rarely talked about himself in the war, but braised his fellow comrades instead. His selflessness isn't something this world has to offer much anymore. He told us a story about one

stressed-out soldier and a little Vietnamese boy around ten years old. The boy was sticking a live rat into the soldiers' faces and wouldn't stop even after he was asked. So the soldier grabbed the rat, bit the head off, and gave the body back to the boy.

On Koch's third and fourth wedding anniversary, he couldn't even be with his wife. But with his lengthy experience, John learned how to make the best of everything and 'celebrated' his third anniversary doing KP in basic training and his fourth anniversary with his comrades in the rice paddies of Vietnam looking for the enemy. Koch also wrote letters to his wife whenever possible.

In the war, it wasn't about democracy or politics; it was about getting home safe and getting your friends home also. This wasn't an easy task, since they were being ambushed and hitting trip wires two or three times a week. So much death had to be seen and left behind. The horror of running through gunfire and also the maiming and loss of his comrades. The war seemed as though it was not whether the politics were right or wrong, but was just a numbers game. The war became all about how many enemies were killed. Soldiers were supposed to report the total number of enemy kills on a daily basis. Additional enemy body count credits were given for any killed or wounded soldiers. Medals were awarded from what the government saw as 'progress'.

There was the story of the draftee soldier who could not bring himself to shoot at another person. Then, almost by accident, an enemy sniper was killed by that soldier who eventually re-enlisted and made the Army his profession. He eventually rose to the rank of Command Sergeant-Major before reaching his mandatory retirement age of sixty. Throughout his career, he vowed never to treat any of his men the way they were treated in Vietnam.

As for Koch, he was awarded the CIB, Air Medal and Commendation Medal. He returned to America in 1969 and was honorably discharged in 1970. He is still married to the same woman he wed in 1965 and is now retired from a career on Wall Street.

Ever since the war ended, his relations with the Vietnamese were not bad. One of his most heartwarming experiences was when some former Vietnamese nationals invited him and several other vets to Westminster to celebrate TET. The former soldiers were treated as guests of honor and told by the people of Westminster that “If you ever find yourself with no place to live, you will always be welcome in Westminster.” It was such a peaceful and welcoming experience, even though the two countries had been in conflict not too long ago.

A tribute to a former soldier found on the internet became John Koch’s hero. Roy P. Benavidez came from a poor, disadvantaged childhood to become one of the bravest warriors of all time. Roy was jumping out of a helicopter to save his wounded comrades when he was shot multiple times and hit by grenade fragments. Yet he still pressed on to reach his men, retrieved some important documents from the enemy and rallied the troops. During the fight he was shot several more times, then clubbed with a rifle and stabbed with a bayonet. Even though he was later thought to be deceased from his massive wounds, he managed to survive. He was one of the most powerful soldiers who ever lived. All eight men he rescued that day survived. It still took the government thirteen years to recognize his heroic deeds and award him his Medal of Honor. Then, government bureaucrats took away Roy’s benefits until President Reagan intervened. Obviously these bureaucrats must have felt that Roy would no longer need his benefits even though he was still suffering from the effects of his wounds. Roy died in 1998.

The truly valiant soldiers, who are deserving of praise, did not receive any. Instead, they were abandoned. Even though they never met, Koch always admired Roy for his heroic actions. John Koch has gained much wisdom from the war. He was able to experience it first handedly and see death first handedly. “The reward for overcoming an obstacle is another obstacle,” right? Life is full of twists and turns and we all must learn to make the best of it.