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Richard R. Garza

Richard Garza was born on January 26, 1946. As the youngest child of nine children and the son of a minister, he grew up shy and disciplined. He shined as a track star in his college years, breaking his school's two-mile record. He also met a girl named Linda, who would not only be his Spring Formal date but later, his wife. They married on March 15, 1968, only months before a certain event would separate them for a year and half. Richard was drafted on August 12, 1969 and became an infantry soldier. In February of 1969, he found himself in the middle of the Vietnam War, a choice he did not make for himself. He was forced to enter the war leaving behind his family and his wife. If it weren't for the draft, he most likely would have stayed home. He says, "I didn't pick the service, the service picked me."

The Garza family already had a history of family members who had fought in war. Richard's great grandfather had fought against the French in Mexico. Two of his older brothers were involved in World War II. One of his brothers served in Vietnam before him and once again, Richard's mother would have to say goodbye to a son whose life would be in danger.

Richard was put into the 9th Infantry Division and first set foot in Vietnam on February 21, 1969. He didn't want to be there. He missed his family and his wife especially. They had only been married for five months when the draft forced him into the service. Luckily, his experience as a soldier would not be so bad as he found himself a partner and best friend who would share this journey with him, a man named Sam. Sam made the journey a little less difficult, but the task ahead of them and the troops was a big one. Their strategy was simple: go

out into the jungle for one month, back to the base and repeat. Fortunately, Richard and Sam made it until the end of their service together, but it was not always easy during and after the war.

Richard's first encounter with the enemy was intense. The whole platoon was in the jungle setting up positions. Richard and a GI named Marsh were watching this area when three Vietcong soldiers walked by. Richard did not know who they were so he alerted Marsh, who yelled "Come here!" The Vietcong soldiers started to run and Marsh fired his rifle, but it was on safety. When Richard heard a click sound he knew that they were the enemy, so he started shooting. Then immediately after, the whole platoon started firing. In another instance, the troops were in the jungle when Richard saw the enemy. He ducked down and fired two shots. Bang bang! The enemy started shooting and Richard laid flat on his back. He pulled out a grenade and tried to throw it—like John Wayne, "The Duke"—but it didn't go far. His ears rang from the explosion. He pulled out another grenade for a second try but failed again to throw it very far; it instead hit the leaf of a banana tree. Richard believed that it was a sign: God's way of saying "That's enough killing of my children." However, all explosions caused the Vietcong to run. One of his experiences in battle actually ended on a happier note, when Richard and his fellow soldiers captured and tried to convince some Vietcong soldiers, to join them on our side. They were sent to some sort of camp. "He became one of us," Richard says. In another close encounter with a Vietcong, he took one's rifle and vest. He has kept the vest until this day—unwashed with blood stains—as an uncommon souvenir.

Despite the combat and fighting in the jungle, Richard and the other soldiers found ways to enjoy themselves. Richard enjoyed writing letters and sending pictures to his family. He was sure that his mother was worried for him, but he flashed a big smile in every one of his photos to

tell her, “Mom, I’m okay.” His mother in turn sent him food including large cans of Rosarita beans and pineapples, which he would share with the other soldiers. Also, as the child of a minister, Richard prayed a lot. He prayed before meals, at night and even in the jungle. But the stress and pressure on the soldiers was unavoidable and very real. Richard and his friends tried to make themselves feel better when they got the chance and said, “It don’t mean nothing.”

After one month of combat in the jungle, the soldiers had one day to rest and some took the opportunity to have a party and drink beer. Although Richard was one of the few who sustained from alcohol, he believed he could still have fun. The story of Richard and the grenades was one that Sam liked to tell to a lot of the other soldiers. The soldiers also enjoyed a Fourth of July celebration (although, one day early on July 3) and were even visited by Ronald Reagan’s daughter, who entertained the troops. Richard and Sam—like true best friends—played pranks on each other during their service. In one prank, Richard pulled Sam’s towel from underneath him after they had taken their showers. And to get back at Richard, Sam deflated Richard’s air bed one morning. Despite their position as soldiers in the war, they did find ways to forget about fighting, even if for a little while.

Two months before the end of his service, Richard became a security guard. Then he left Vietnam on February 22, 1970, a full year after arriving. He was sent back to America, where he hoped to go straight home to his family, but he had to remain at Fort Riley in Kansas for another five months. After finally leaving Fort Riley, Richard was flown to San Francisco. He was excited to be back, but his experience in the airport was strange. He could not understand why he and the other soldiers were being ignored. He saw some who had gone into the bathroom to

change into civilian clothing. Why were they changing? Did they feel guilty? Richard did not feel good about the situation at all and this feeling was carried with him later into his life.

Despite the lack of honorable recognition for soldiers during and immediately after the Vietnam War, they were the ones who fought the hardest for their country. Looking back, Richard does not regret his service. He is happy to have served his country, and his fellow countrymen and women are very thankful and proud of him and all service members who have served, are serving and will serve America in the forces. The memories of Vietnam will remain with him forever and his story will pass on. When he remembers Vietnam he says, "I'm glad it's over, but if I had to do it again, I would."