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Period 1

Mike Schmitz

United States Air Force

25 years in service

2017

### Mike Schmitz

The Vietnam war was a devastating time in American history lasting between 1959-1975 where over 2.7 million soldiers served. Although many fought on the battlefield, others worked behind the scenes supporting the front lines, such as Mike Schmitz. Mike Schmitz was born in Wisconsin in 1944. Schmitz felt that since a lot of his family members had joined the military, that he too was obligated to serve in their honor. So in 1962 he decided to make the decision to join the Air Force as a radar operator.

When the fighting in Vietnam began Schmitz would soon be deployed to Vietnam. During his time in Vietnam one of Schmitz's jobs would be to locate downed planes and helicopters and organize the people who would get the downed crew to safety as quickly as possible. He would first send out planes to draw in enemy fire and to see if the pilot was surrounded, then he would send in a helicopter to save the pilot as soon as possible. The process to save these pilots could take anywhere between three hours to five days depending on how bad the situation was. Schmitz learned a lot about survival during his deployment in Vietnam. He

said that he learned that if a monkey could eat something then it was usually safe to eat, and if something is untouched by the local animals to avoid it as it is probably poisonous or toxic. In places like Vietnam, the amount of bugs was ridiculous according to Schmitz who also said that “You would never slap bugs off your body as that would make too much noise and could give away your position, but you would wipe the bugs off.” Schmitz recalls during his deployment, nature was one of his biggest obstacles/threats.

Schmitz’s military life in the states was mainly just training and monitoring the coastlines. There was much paranoia about going to war with Russia. Often times, Russia would even send planes down right off of U.S. coastlines well within U.S. territory. They sent these planes to see how the U.S. would react in these scenarios and defend against them, almost as if they were testing the U.S.

Monitoring the coastline was not just limited to the United States. Schmitz was also deployed to Northern Canada and monitored their coast from 1964-1965 on a radar site in the mountains. The temperatures at this site were very cold, often reaching negative temperatures. Men were constantly 24/7 having to shovel snow from the entrances so that if something were to happen within the building, like a fire, all the men would be able to exit safely. Remote places like this can really test a man’s sanity, as men would sometimes resort to suicide. Some turned to alcohol and others did anything else they could to occupy their time. Needless to say, things could get very boring in these sites. Another downside to living on these remote sites was the limited contact with family. In order to contact a loved one, you would first have to make an appointment to call them. However, these calls would be very brief, generally lasting about a couple minutes.

After his time in the Air Force, Schmitz ended up still working as a radar operator for customs and used his experience and skills to track down aircraft trying to smuggle drugs, and in doing this he would end up spending time in Mexico where he discovered that he did not like the way Americans would act in other countries. Americans acted arrogant and felt they should get special treatment if they were to break a law in a different country. He said people should learn the rules of different countries before visiting them, not after they have broken the law. Sure enough during spring break many people would get in trouble and lost, in which it would be one of Schmitz's jobs to try to locate and rescue these people.

Joining the Air Force was a great experience for Schmitz, as he enjoyed all twenty five years serving as a radar operator. He loved the adventure that the military brought alongside with the hard work. Each location he went to brought along new culture and different life styles. Although not always fun at times, he said, "It is not something that I would take back or change in anyway."