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APUSH Period 3

Terry Atkinson – Navy

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“We learned fast not to talk about Vietnam; We were all baby killers...[Vietnam] was just something to forget.” Terry Atkinson, like many thousands of now aging American men, has spent the last four decades carrying the mental and physical burden of one of the United States’ most hated, yet forgotten wars. The war in Vietnam was one Atkinson neither asked for nor wanted, yet when the time came, it was he who was made to do the fighting. While Atkinson was lucky enough to leave the war without severe physical harm, he makes no mistake about the reality of his condition; the war has left him mentally scarred and disabled, as it left so many others. Terry Atkinson was simply serving his country, but instead of receiving a hero's welcome when he returned home, the Vietnam war left him with a substance use disorder and irreversible mental damage. The life stories of all veterans are important, but when it comes to the men and women who served in such a universally hated war, we have an even greater duty to preserve and protect their narratives, lest their heroism be forgotten by their peers.

Terry Atkinson was born in Hollywood, California, 1951. By the age of 17 he had joined the Navy alongside his high school friend. Atkinson was aware of the draft, but had no intention of enlisting on his own; at least, not until this high school friend of his was arrested. After being given the option of incarceration or military services, Atkinson’s friend choose the service, and convinced Atkinson to join with him. Basic Training ended on the day of Terry’s 18th birthday,

and then, two weeks later, he was sent off to Vietnam aboard the USS Vernon County (LST-1161).

After spending three months as a Boatswain's Mate, Terry Atkinson was transferred to the Gunnery Division in which he would serve out the rest of his tour. On board the LST there were three twin three inch 50-caliber gun mounts, and as a Gunner's Mate, Atkinson was responsible for operating one of those mounts during missions. Often Atkinson would be assigned with providing support fire to the Army on the shores in their fight against the VietCong. These supporting fire missions weren't the only missions conducted by the LST. The LST was also responsible for delivering ammunition to the Army in their camps on the ground. Not only would this mean restocking helicopters with ammo when they would land on the ship between or during missions, but it also entitled sending small landing boats down the rivers to friendly camps. Unfortunately, it was during these trips to friendly camps, that Terry and his fellow servicemen were the most exposed. While Atkinson did not go into detail about his experiences on the rivers, it is clear that they were some of the most difficult, damaging times. However, even when back on the LST, the threat of the Vietnamese was always present. VietCong swimmers would, at every opportunity, try and plant bombs onto American ships. What's frightening is the fact that these swimmers were actually successful the day after the Vernon County had left port, further affecting the mental state of all aboard.

During his deployment, it was common for Atkinson to witness men get into fights – seeing as they were all very young and didn't have another outlet to express their pent up emotions. However, Terry quickly learned of the only real outlet for all his pent up feelings: Rest and Relaxation time. On some occasions, Atkinson was able to experience some nice, exotic

places while away from combat; however most of the R&R time was spent drinking as a group in an effort to forget the unwanted scenes that haunted in their minds. Terry himself was actually a quite successful drummer and would often play with the Asian bands while on shore as a way of relaxing too. With the remaining free time, Terry would read books and listen to music. All of these activities were ways Terry and his fellow servicemen would relax while trying to forget about the horror and bloodshed that surrounded them.

After serving in the Navy for nearly four years, Terry Atkinson exited the service with numerous accolades. Some of these awards included the Vietnam Service Medal, Philippine Republic Presidential Unit Citation, and the Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal with Bronze Star. Atkinson also was awarded two personal commendations for campaigns that he had fought, however, his decision to burn these “awards” shows just how desperately he wanted to forget about the brutal war he had fought through. For Terry Atkinson, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was and still is something that he is forced to deal with on a daily basis. After leaving the service though, Atkinson went to school in an effort to move on and start a better life with a family. School was difficult, though, and Terry did not end up graduating as all he had initially intended to. He instead turned to drinking, using other illicit substances, and involvement with tough motorcyclists to try and get rid of the painful memories seared into his mind. However, in the last few decades, Atkinson has gotten ahold of his substance abuse problems through rehabilitation centers, pioneered several successful businesses, and has started a family. Unfortunately, Terry’s struggle with the mental disability the war left him with is far from over, and to this day he attends a bi-monthly Combat Veteran Support Group at the Loma Linda VA Hospital.