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KHR Narrative

Michael Zacker was born in Los Angeles in 1946, but grew up in San Diego after moving there when he was five years old. He began to run newspaper routes in the eighth grade, using the money he earned to buy himself new sneakers that were constantly worn out from his various athletic activities. When not at school or working his paper routes, Michael was at the beach--surfing and scuba diving. Zacker still enjoys activities such as swimming, diving and volunteering for various organizations. Growing up, he always knew he would join the Marine Corps, and after witnessing a group of disheveled sailors squabbling on the side of the road “like seagulls” before they were promptly put to shame while making way for a pair of proud, respectable Marines, he knew which direction his life would go. At the age of seventeen when he was told to leave home, Zacker graduated left high school his junior year at age 17, and began his Marine Corps training in April 1963, earning his GED later that year in August.

When he enlisted he only missed one question on his exam, and his high scores allowed him to obtain an Aviation Guarantee. He went to boot camp in San Diego, Infantry school at Camp Pendleton, and aviation schools at Memphis, TN and Jacksonville, FL. He had always found aviation technologies such as combat helicopters very interesting and innovative. Zacker’s early service consisted of Marine Corps drill instructors that seemed to never stop shouting at him, but he had finally found a real family that cared about him, would never let him down, and

“wanted [him] as member.” The Marine Corps is distinct from the other branches of the military in the sense that an individual may join the Army, the Navy, or another branch but “to become a Marine you have to earn it.” This uniqueness is seen in their hymn, as all the other branches have a song as well as in their few yet effective combat uniforms, which other branches have yet to perfect. Zacker holds the Marines extremely close to his heart and truly believes that “once you become a Marine, you will always be a Marine.”

He was first stationed at Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in Orange County before he requested a transfer to a helicopter squadron so he could serve in Vietnam. He arrived on September 1st, 1965 in the Republic of Vietnam and began his first fourteen months in combat. The U.S. had to honor a treaty that said they would provide assistance against the communist soldiers in North Vietnam. He then returned to Vietnam three more times, serving a total of four tours. During his fourth and final tour in Vietnam, his helicopter squadron helped evacuate over 3,000 individuals from Saigon, RVN. Zacker had various positions during these tours, some of which are helicopter machine-gunner, flying precision navigation equipment operator, and as the helicopter crew chief. He also used his swimming skills to be a Search and Rescue Swimmer. Despite the reality of war being a “living hell,” he continued to serve with his fellow Marines to ensure our nation was safe and strong. Later he was assigned Sergeant Major of Marine Forces Southwest Asia in Operation Desert Storm. He played many roles in Vietnam, from flying with the Ugly Angels, to being a downed aircraft recovery team member, but something that will always stand out to him is flying the “Medevacs” in Vietnam and saving many Marine lives.

While in service, Zacker experienced discrimination from civilians early in his career in Jacksonville, FL, but he tried to ignore the rudeness and “he and his black friends ignored it and

would move elsewhere.” When he got back from the war in Vietnam “the best [he] got was spit on” because while away at war, the media and “peace lovers” seemed to forget that they were fighting the war in order to honor the treaty. The media often misguided the youth into looking down upon the war abroad and Marines and other soldiers were often labelled “warmongers.” Zacker and other Marines were protecting American lives as well as others’ lives, but the media and people back home did not realize that, or they chose to ignore that fact and greeted the returning Servicemen with extreme cruelty. Despite the bad publicity, Zacker recalled, “we [hated] war, but we also [realized] we [needed] to be able to fight, to keep our country.” His reception at home from Operation Desert storm was completely different. The veterans were rightly treated as heroes, and were treated with respect. While his reception home from Vietnam was horrible, Michael was (and still is) proud of his service and proud to protect our country and our freedoms. While war is terrible, it is sometimes necessary in order to protect our values and rights from those who would take them away from us. Zacker firmly believes that his military service was positive and the most valuable thing he will ever experience.

When he returned home from the war, the G.I. bill allowed him to finish his Masters degree in Business Administration. Finishing his education had always been a goal of his and the bill allowed him to reach it. He earned his Real Estate License and worked as a mortgage loan officer and became the operations manager of a loan company, and later, he joined an employment agency. His love of the Marine Corps never left him, and he served five years with the Marine Corps Recruit Depot Museum Historical Society Board of Directors before joining the management of Goodwill Industries and retiring in 2000. Now he is involved with the Flying Leathernecks Aviation Museum as a museum docent and is a member of the board of directors.

Zacker continues to work with the Marines and other veterans. Zacker has received countless award for his bravery and service which include, but aren't limited to: the Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal, the Humanitarian Service Medal, and the Presidential Unit Citation. He has not lost contact with fellow Marines and continues to honor their friendship. He attends biannual reunions with fellow veterans, living the part of a Marine for decades and will continue to live the part in the future.