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King High Remembers

Jerry Bennett was fresh out of high school, living in Long Beach, California, a navy town. War had broken out and it was weighing heavily on his mind. The Pastor's son had died serving, his brother was serving, his father had served, so what was he still doing waiting for the government to fish his birthday from the hat and hand him his lottery reward: a uniform and a ticket to southeast Asia.

Bennett had only attended the Long Beach City College for a year before he enlisted. Immediately he started at the Naval Training Center in San Diego in November, 1971. After completing training there, he moved to Pensacola, Florida to attend the Naval Communication Training Command. His role in the Navy was to be apart of the Naval Security Group that went by the Code MRIO. M for maintenance, R for intercepted code, I for language, and O for operator. Being a communication technician required a unique concentration and ability to interpret codes being sent from ships to troops. This task was a challenge for Bennett initially because he felt that he lacked the education to be able to carry the weight. He had moved schools frequently throughout his middle school and high school years which left him feeling educationally lost and held him at what seemed to be a disadvantage. Fortunately, he had mentors within the troop to help encourage him in his academics during the service, and through this push he realized he was a lot smarter than he initially thought. It was through their help and his determination that he was able to quickly advance, and then be granted the opportunity to

take on the job of cryptographic decoder ring duty, which only 3 in about the 400 men were chosen to do. Before this duty could be bestowed upon him during the war, lots of preparation was to be done during bootcamp.

He had undergone bootcamp in San Diego for twelve weeks. Young Bennett was hardened with lessons he was never to forget, like shooting a rifle, something that had always frightened him yet was now a reality he had to face. From there, he moved on to Pensacola, Florida to receive additional training for naval communication.

With his bootcamp and his naval communications training complete, Bennett, scared with what was to come, was stationed in the Philippines for 15 months essentially as a spy on the Vietnamese in North Vietnamese waters. Bennet mentions the most exciting thing message heard by his colleagues was a Russian voice. At the time Russia had denied any involvement with the Vietnamese. He worked hard. He worked twelve hours on and twelve hours off decoding messages. Instruments which he worked with frequently were the telatype and the cryptograph. Little sleep was had and life was fairly sedentary in these small communication rooms, barely big enough for he himself let alone others to fit in. Although, he couldn't complain, there was showers and good food and it was relatively safe.

There were even some fun moments in the midst of this solemn war. Some of the sailors played a prank by replacing one man's anti-sea sickness medication with laxatives. Furthermore, he crossed the equator in April of 1973 and earned the title of a shellback.

Like anyone else though, they could joke and try to distract themselves with duties, but Bennett did think about home and the family he left behind. He had even called up his mother to at three in the morning to tell her he was bringing her back pearl earrings from Japan. He had

sent letters and kept in touch but sometimes the homesickness did strike but he powered through and was determined to make it back to them to deliver those earrings by his own hand. His faith motivating him the entire way.

Finally, in January of 1973 he had learned he made it through to the other side. Bennett had received the message that the Paris Peace Treaty was signed and the war was over. Ironically enough, he had to keep the news to himself for over 24 hours before the rest of the crew could know. Something that he still considers the most difficult thing he has ever had to do. Although when coming home, Vietnam veterans were not welcome and even refuted against which was hard for many men as they had given their all for the war effort and received no recognition. Still motivated to continue his education, after arriving home Bennett, with the help of the GI Bill, attended California Baptist University where he studied to become a minister. Bennet spent the rest of his adult life as a minister and inspired all who listened with the story of his bravery and his courage during his service in the Vietnam war.

Today, Bennet has just retired. He now serves the wholesome duties of father, husband, and grandfather to his beautiful grandchildren. He is happy and grateful for his experiences and one hundred percent believes they have shaped him to be the man he is today and have influenced him throughout his ministry and the raising of his family.

Thank you Mr. Bennet. Thank you for your service and your sacrifices. Thank you for your willingness to share your stories and the smiles and laughs you brought us all. We will never forget your story nor will we forget the beautiful heart which you and other soldiers alike possess as you served your country with the utmost certainty that you would under all circumstances protect your country no matter the cost. Our beloved nation is beyond blessed to

have men and women like you with this same ideal in mind. Again, thank you, you will not be forgotten.