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APUSH Period 3

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### Donald Fleming

Donald Fleming was born in 1947 in the town of Gary, Indiana, and served in the Navy for twenty years, including the Vietnam War. Mr. Fleming had planned on going to college immediately after graduating high school, but because of the conflict in Vietnam, he and his friends decided to join the military instead, joining with the motive of serving their country. He eventually decided on enlisting in the navy because of his experience as a machinist apprentice and his brother's recommendation to *not* join the army, since he had enlisted there and found it unappealing. In the Navy, Donald worked as a machinist mate with the skills he gained as a machinist apprentice for a steel mill in high school.

After high school, Donald went to the recruiting station in Chicago, Illinois. Once there, he was given the option to either receive training near the Great Lakes, or in San Diego. It was the middle of December, so he had decided to train in San Diego, leading him to live in California for the rest of his life. He described boot camp as high school, comparing the new recruits to freshmen in the training and how it may seem scary, rough, or tough when you first join. The adjutants were a little mean and Donald felt nervous and lost, but over time, the training got easier and he was more comfortable with it. It consisted of lots of physical training, marching, and drill reps, with the intent of breaking the young men down to build them up

stronger than before. Once his training was over, he travelled to his first duty station in Seattle, Washington.

His first duty station was at Pier 91 in Seattle, where he worked in the laundry room of a reserve ship. While serving on the reserve ship, he went to San Francisco. On the journey, Mr. Fleming suffered from extreme nausea. Donald stated, “You only get seasick once,” mentioning that this was the only time during his service that he got seasick. The first ship he worked on, Donald said, is “like boot camp all over again”. He began working in the aft engine room of the USS Somers, which was the guided missile destroyer #34. He worked an 8 hour job, maintaining the engine, assuring that it worked without issues. If he did something wrong, restriction would be issued, and he would have to work longer than his normal allotted shift. Over time, he became accustomed to his new job and felt confident in his new duties.

Life on the USS Somers was full of ups and downs. During his time on the Somers, they had done three “tours” of Vietnam, providing fire for the land attacks on the coast while on the gun line. In his time off, Donald would play games, listen to music, and watch movies with his newfound friends. Although most of the people on the ship were nice and good friends with Donald, there were some who discriminated against him and were rude to him because of his skin color. Nonetheless, their fun and games would be interjected by their practice of general quarters, assuring they know what to do if an attack on them were to occur. However, they didn’t spend their entire time sailing on the ship. The Somers would dock in various ports and the men would be given “liberty,” where they could have fun on the land; Donald and his friends would go to bars and drink with each other during this time, and they would also visit famous landmarks.

Donald Fleming is a family man, and during his service, he missed his family very dearly. There was a mail call every four days on the ship, and he would write to his parents, brothers, and girlfriend every day during his service. He wrote because he missed his family, but also because he was very scared and nervous while in Vietnam. Donald prayed a lot before going overseas because he wanted God to protect him and his fellow soldiers on the USS Somers.

Upon returning home from Vietnam, Mr. Fleming, along with the rest of the Vietnam War veterans, were not treated with the proper respect that had previously been shown to veterans of the first two World Wars. The Vietnam War was highly controversial in its nature, many believing that the war was wasting American resources and human lives in an unnecessary war against a small, insignificant country. Instead of holding the government responsible for the losses of the war, many Americans blamed the soldiers that fought in the Vietnam War. Upon returning home, Donald was told that he could not wear his Navy uniform in public. There were no thank-you's or parades for any of the Vietnam War veterans, like there had been for veterans from World War I or II. He was often mocked by the public, being called names such as "warmonger" or "baby-killer", after the military's retaliation against the Vietnamese tactic of sending children between 2 to 5 into American military camps armed with explosives.

Despite returning from the war perceived as a villain rather than a hero, Mr. Fleming regrets nothing about his time spent in the service. According to him, he "became a man in the service". He had also achieved the rank of a First Class Machinist Mate, and his ship had earned the Combat Action Award, The Korean Expeditionary Medal, and many others. After fighting for so long to protect the rights of everyday Americans, it pains him to see people not taking the opportunity to stand up for what they believe. He applauds the students that participated in the

nation-wide walkout that occurred on March 14 for their courage to stand up for their beliefs.

The best way we, as a country, can honor veterans like Donald Fleming is to participate in the democracy that they fought so hard to protect -- to write to our senators, to vote in elections, and to stand up for what we believe.