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APUSH

Biography of Joe Gonzalez

Joe Gonzalez was more or less an “average Joe” up until he was drafted for United States Army and sent across the sea to the marshes of Vietnam. He lived his life during the war on a day to day basis, simply doing what he was told and focusing on the task at hand. He became what he was expected to be, a loyal soldier who put in the effort that was needed with no questions asked. However, when he returned home, he received nothing but ridicule and dirty looks from the society that he was once apart of. Gonzalez was outcasted and alienated for participating in a war that he was forced to fight in. Ultimately, he became another unknown soldier of the Vietnam War whose story was undercut and condemned by a society that did not accept him.

Before the draft, Joe Gonzalez lived a normal life for a youthful man in the 1960s. He had a girlfriend and a loving family who believed in the traditional roles of men working and women staying home to take care of the house. He graduated from Ramona High School during which he played basketball and baseball, which eventually led him to a sports scholarship for Riverside Community College. He went to RCC directly after high school and used his scholarship to complete his freshman year of college. However, during his sophomore year of college, his name was pulled for the draft of the Vietnam War and he had a momentous decision to make. Gonzalez could either flee to Canada along with many other “draft dodgers” or do his

patriotic duty and serve in the United States Army to fight along with many other young adults who were also selected for the draft. He chose the latter, choosing to fight for his country and not back down from the great task that was placed before him. The young college student was then sent off to boot camp at the age of twenty years old.

When Gonzalez first stepped foot on the grounds of boot camp, it was nothing short of confusing, he was either on “latrine duty” or “trash duty”. However, he very quickly began to see actual training ranging anywhere from routine marching to memorization of the Army’s core values. Once he began his basic training, he belonged to the military and he had to do whatever he was told with no questions asked. Along with the basic training of the frontline infantry, he also received artillery training and frontline repair training, which would eventually be put to work when he flew over to Vietnam. He was never looking for rank, but he became a Private within six months of boot camp and was entitled to two promotions to become a Specialist and a Sergeant, receiving combat leadership training to become efficient in all types of weaponry. He completed his basic training and graduated from boot camp on his twenty-first birthday in 1966 as the rank of Private, despite his entitlement to being promoted, and flew to Vietnam in the same year.

Although Gonzalez graduated as a Private, he flew over to Vietnam as the rank of Private First Class and was eventually promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant to fill the gap left by the men who put their life on the line for their country. He brought with him a picture of the Virgin Mary that was gifted to him by the mother of a Medal of Honor recipient and carried that picture with him wherever he went along with a Virgin Mary necklace. He served for the 25th Infantry and the 2/9 Artillery Division as well as the Tiger and Dove Units while he was one his 18

month tour in Vietnam. While in the foreign land of Vietnam, Gonzalez carried with him the philosophy of taking care of himself and focusing on the mission. He had to stay focused at all times because “that’s the only thing you can do” and if you panicked, then it could very well mean the end of it. He tried to stay in contact with his family as much as he could despite the inconsistent times in which he received letters from them or which he could write back. He distanced himself from making any friends while on the frontlines, as the man who you once could call a friend could be gone the next week. He distanced himself from his girlfriend and lied to his family to lessen the emotional baggage that they carry while they worry if Gonzalez’s convey got hit or if it was a neighboring unit. His experience in the humid jungles was that of utter confusion, he didn’t know where he was or who was friendly and who was an enemy. He didn’t know who was shooting at him and from where, all he knew was that he needed to focus and stay calm. Entertainment was scarce in the claustrophobic confines of Vietnam, but Gonzalez and his men tried their best to stay sane in whatever way they could. Between night watches and rapid day movement, the men kept their humanity with “two beers at night” and simply having fun with the guys. Gonzalez concluded his tour in 1967 and flew home to an unwelcoming society and a bitter reality of the home front during the Vietnam War.

Gonzalez returned home to threats, food being thrown at him, and random civilians spitting on him for being a “baby killer” and a “monster”. He had to be escorted by helicopter to another location along with many other returning soldiers who got the same bitter treatment as him. When he returned home, the GI Bill helped him get back on his feet and helped him pay for a home with his wife and eventually support his future children. However, this government support does not overshadow the glaring reality of Gonzalez’s treatment by others around him

because of the actions committed in a foreign land. In the workplace, he got sideways glances and awkward looks. People actively avoided him based off of assumptions that the media created about the soldiers in Vietnam. He made sacrifices for his country and for the safety of the American people, but he was punished for it. He didn't get any grand welcoming home party as the soldiers of previous wars did despite the fact that the Vietnam War was one of the first wars to feature guerilla warfare tactics on a brutal scale. Rather, he was greeted with emotional alienation as society viewed the soldiers as "death mongers". Long after the war had ended, the reputation of the Vietnam veterans has not fully recovered and although they have begun to be recognized more in the modern day, men like Gonzalez are still massively under appreciated. The veterans of the war in Vietnam welcomed the soldiers returning from the Middle East with open arms, treating the new wave of soldiers the way that they should have been treated, but never got.

Veterans, like Joe Gonzalez, have survived the test of time despite overwhelming odds on the front lines as well as on the home front. Gonzalez put his life on the line for his country and did his duty with focus, determination, and vigilance. He did not back down from the fight and flee the draft, rather, he focused on the mission and did what he was told with outstanding performance. He was condemned and ridiculed by society, but he still held strong. He serves as a shining example of what it means to be a true American, patriotic and determined to complete his mission.