

The well known military saying “there are no atheists in foxholes” has always struck me simply because of the unadulterated veracity of the statement. The logistics can be debated: there are and have been a great many servicemen across history that did not believe in any sort of deity. But risking everything really makes you question why you are there in the first place, and patriotism and duty and all the other jargon thrown around about serving your country begins to lose its steam when you are covered in mud and getting shot at.

High words regarding military service can be and have been heard from high ranking officers of the United States military, the necessary “why” and “how” of the proposed bill. If the American public was interested in such opinions and explanations they need only open a history book or the latest news feed. What the men and women of this country need to know before the rest is “what”. What, if the proposed bill goes forward, will our young men be working, sacrificing, perhaps even dying for?

In answer, I turn to a man who has received no medals, no great recognition, no heroic action on some far off, imaginary battlefield. Charles Leven Williams Jr., my grandfather, is an Arkansan farmer who served in the National Guard from 1967 to 1974, in the midst of the Vietnam War. Mr. Williams began as a Private E1; “Private Last Class”, he relates with a chuckle, enduring eight weeks of bootcamp and many weekends of guard duty and KP his first few months with the National Guard, all while providing for his wife and small children and working full time on his farm. His best job, in his own opinion, was not leading troops or making notable tactical decisions, but getting to be the colonel’s driver. He missed holidays, milestones, memories.

I asked the obvious. “Why did you join?”

“We were in the middle of the Vietnam War,” he said. “I wanted to help how I could.” He laughs at the look on my face. “It wasn’t easy; I’m not going to lie. It gives you a new appreciation for all the people who came before us and all that they gave up. Not just weekends, but whole years of their lives.”

“Sure.” I thought of founding fathers, civil war uniforms, the opening scenes of Saving Private Ryan.

“My daddy served in the war,” he tells me. “Your great grandfather. So did your grandmother’s father. Even my mother was on the draft board. That was a hard thing to ask families to do, ask mothers to leave their homes to work. But there wasn’t anyone else to do the jobs; all the men were at war. Those were hard times, and yet everyone came together, and they worked hard. You don’t really see that anymore. You know, we have a lot of freedom,” he went on to say. “That’s what everyone loves America, why everyone wants to live in America, because of our freedoms. We forget sometimes that that freedom comes at a price. Serving in the guard, I could see why they did what they did. It’s really something to give up everything.”

“It wasn’t all bad,” he went on to say. “I think it really taught me discipline. When you’re in the guard, you have a boss, and you do what they tell you to do. You know, no matter who you are and where you live and what you make, you always have a boss. You always have someone you’re accountable to. And whether or not it’s a good experience or not depends on your attitude towards it. Serving teaches young people discipline and a sense of duty. I was really able to feel pride in a job well done.”

With unemployment rates continuing to drop in the US, it is important to equip the young people of America with the skills they need to listen to instruction, work with others, and take pride in their work (“US Bureau of Labor Statistics”). As we enjoy our relative peacetime, it is

important to remember that just a few decades ago our great grandparents were sacrificing everything so that we could stand here. And as we congregate, vote for our leaders, and even read the newspaper, it is just as important as ever to remember that men had to fight and die so that we could, and that our veterans and active service members have given up years of their lives to keep those freedoms safe.

The men who serve in the United States military are not thinking about an imaginary flag over the White House as they work. They are thinking about their cities, their homes; the children in the park and their armchair in the corner. They are not thinking about honoring our president or President Washington or the founding fathers. They are thinking about their fathers, the ones who left their families to fight for what they knew was right and honoring what they worked for. And in the heat of battle, they are not fighting for poster children on propaganda posters, but for their children, for your children, to make the world a better place for me and you.

Serving in the United States military is not easy, and it is not heroic. If my grandfather's account relates anything, it is that service is normally quite the opposite. And yet, I believe that what he did was noble. He sacrificed years of his life because he believed that his children and grandchildren deserved to live in a country where we could be safe and free. And now it is our turn, my fellow Americans, to do the same. In the words of John F. Kennedy, "Ask not what your country can do for you- ask what you can do for your country."

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Works Cited

“US Bureau of Labor Statistics”, *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 14 July 2023, www.bls.gov/.