

The sacrifice, the separation ... the secret



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Aitkin resident Tom Ellis is a 76-year-old disabled combat veteran of the Vietnam War who served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1968-1970. Ellis shared his experience of serving during the war as an artilleryman and what reintegrating back into Minnesota life postwar was like.

After graduating from Aitkin High School in 1968, Ellis chose to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps. With the draft a real possibility at the time, he decided to take matters into his own hands and join voluntarily.

Ellis decided to join the Marine Corps specifically be-

cause his uncle had served in the same branch during World War II. Inspired by his uncle's example, he believed that if his uncle could do it, so could he. He blamed it on having "the mind of an 18-year-old."

Boot camp ran from 4:30 a.m.-9 p.m. and although it typically lasted 13 weeks, Ellis' session was shortened to eight to send troops overseas more quickly. As a designated artilleryman, he was deployed to northern South Vietnam, where he was stationed at a site the troops called the "Rock Pile."

The "Rock Pile" was a U.S. military observation post and artillery base in Vietnam, officially named Elliot Combat Base, used from 1966-1969. Its

strategic location atop a 240-meter high rock outcropping gave it a commanding view over key infiltration routes from North Vietnam, south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Ellis' artillery unit was armed with 8-inch howitzers, the largest and most powerful type of artillery in the Marine Corps inventory. An 8-inch howitzer is a heavy artillery piece with an 8-inch (203 mm) bore, used for general support, counter-battery fire and suppressing enemy air defense systems, according to Wikipedia.

When Ellis arrived at the El Toro Marine Corps base in Orange County, he quickly learned that his time serving in Vietnam would have to be a well-kept secret for his own safety. "The first thing they told us to do was take off our uniform and pack it away because there's a lot of people out there that don't agree with what we've done," Ellis explained. Many Vietnam veterans faced hostility. "I put my uniform in my duffel bag and never took it out."

Although reintegrating into life back in Minnesota following his time serving in Vietnam was difficult, especially with not having anyone to confide in, Ellis managed to build a simple life for himself.

He farmed and became a school bus driver for 25 years. Along the way, Ellis met his first wife and together they built a life and family and had three children and four grandchildren.

"Sticking to something is important," he explained. "I

never drew a single unemployment check in my life. I got a job and kept it."

Ellis eventually became a truck driver for a little over a year until he hurt his back in 2004. At that point, his doctor told him that he would either have to retire early or be wheelchair bound for the rest of his life, so Ellis stepped down from his truck driving role.

The two friends that Ellis stayed in touch with from his time in Vietnam ended up being his two best men at his wedding. Although one lived in Montana and the other Maine, Ellis managed to stay in close contact with both until they passed away.

For 35 years following his service, Ellis kept his time in the marines a secret. It wasn't until he discovered a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) support group in Brainerd that he began to open up about his experiences in Vietnam. Ellis' discovery of the new group was in large part thanks to his first wife who passed away 15 years ago. Ellis is now remarried, to his current wife, Sue, of 12 years that he met online.

Ellis expresses his disappointment in the recent cuts toward veteran support services. "There's been a lot of cuts at the VA this past year and it was just getting to a place where it needed to be," said Ellis. "You can tell the workers are stressed at the VA since a lot of their support staff was cut."

"There's a lot of veterans who served in Iraq, Iran and Vietnam who need help and

support but aren't getting it. It really disappoints me."

Ellis and his wife are dedicated activists and can often be seen at local protests (at which he holds a sign identifying himself as a Marine veteran).

The Ellis' live in Palisade. One of their grandchildren plans on joining the Marines. Ellis said in a previous interview that he has reservations about this because of current events. But his grandson is determined. "I guess he's just like I was," Ellis said.

Note: Penny Harms, Aitkin County Veterans Service Officer delved into the recent cuts and changes, "Most of the positions that were cut at the VA

were positions that were created in the past five years," she explained "Some of them were created because of COVID and others were added to assist with gender dysphoria which the VA will no longer treat. The jobs lost were at the three different areas of the VA: Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration and Veterans Cemetery Administration. Some of the cuts were due to restructuring to avoid duplicate services between the administrations."

Despite recent cuts and changes this past year, Harms noticed that claims are being completed about four weeks faster than they had been for the past several years.

