

My Experience Learning the Lessons of Vietnam

By Danielle Poston

The Vietnam War. What was it? Why did it start? Why was the United States involved? These are just a few questions I asked myself after we briefly studied the Vietnam War in U.S. History class. After thinking about it for a while, I began to feel that my generation is being deprived of learning what happened during the Vietnam War. This is a war in our country's history that should never be forgotten; but, I fear if we don't educate my generation about the war, then by the time my generation's children are grown up and have kids of their own, the lessons we have/should have learned from the Vietnam War will be forgotten. I believe Ms. Lindy Poling understands the importance of the Vietnam War and this is why she created a course called *The Lessons of Vietnam*. This is my experience taking an educational course about a war that so many want to forget ever happened.

Near the end of my junior year in high school, I already had an idea for what classes I would take during my senior year, but I only had seven; I needed to choose one more. I had a difficult time choosing one final class to sign up for. One night I was talking with one of my friends about it and she told me that I should take LOV with her. I just stared into space wondering what LOV meant. I realized that it probably was an acronym for a class, so I asked her what LOV stood for. "Lessons of Vietnam", she told me. I asked her what the class was about and she said that it was basically a class all about the Vietnam War. I thought about it for a while and then I came to the conclusion that I had always been interested in learning about wars, how they started, how they ended, who won, etc. So, when it was time to sign up for classes, I made sure to sign up for *Lessons of Vietnam*.

As I walked, quietly, into Ms. Poling's classroom on January 22, 2008, realized I was very nervous about taking this class because I wasn't sure about what I would gain from Ms. Poling or this class about the Vietnam War. Even though Ms. Poling showed her enthusiasm for teaching this class, I still was not convinced that I would gain anything from it. I was soon to be proven wrong about this class. I should have realized by then that all classes start off slow and some tend to become more interesting as the

semester progresses. *Lessons of Vietnam* is one of those classes; it starts off slow, but within a few weeks, you will not regret taking the class.

Even though it was only the second day of school, Ms. Poling did not hesitate to give us our first major paper assignment, our book review. It wasn't the best of gifts at the time, but after reading the book I chose, I could not wait to write the book review. Ms. Poling has quite a selection of books to choose from; from books about the Vietnam War to recent international relations. At the time, I realized I was interested in learning about what American POWs went through during the Vietnam War, so I chose to read Two Souls Indivisible by James S. Hirsch. This is a wonderful book about the true story of two POWs who had to count on each other to make it through their hardships in a North Vietnamese prison camp. This was truly an amazing story that brought me to tears. Reading Two Souls Indivisible and writing the book review was one of the steps I took in this class to create a better understanding of the Vietnam War.

When you watch a movie in any class, you most likely have to answer questions as you watch the movie and turn it in at the end. We watched many documentaries about the Vietnam War in *Lessons of Vietnam*, and we did have questions to answer, but, as long as we paid attention to the movie, Ms. Poling hardly ever collected the questions at the end. Instead, she went over the questions orally with the whole class to make sure we understood what happened. I loved all the documentaries that Ms. Poling showed us because they were not your typical history movies. Even though Ms. Poling admitted that some of the documentaries we watched were considered biased, what I liked about watching them is that we watched a variety of documentaries, so we never just got one side of the story. Another major paper assignment that Ms. Poling assigned was a movie review. She gave us a list of movies we had to choose from to do our movie review on. I chose to watch *We Were Soldiers*. Like the book review, the movie review was definitely worth doing. I had never seen any movies about the Vietnam War that were considered accurate, but *We Were Soldiers*, as I learned after watching the movie, was historically accurate. Even though I don't like to write that much, I enjoyed writing the book and movie reviews! I learned a great deal about the Vietnam War from just writing the reviews.

The students in *Lessons of Vietnam* also have the pleasure of meeting Vietnam Veterans, who take time out of their day to visit Ms. Poling's LOV classes. To prepare for the speakers, Ms. Poling would tell us the speakers biography and have all of us write at least five questions for them. I was nervous at first because I've never met a Vietnam Veteran before and I don't recall ever in high school having speakers come in to my classes. We had the pleasure of hearing fourteen people talk about their experiences during the Vietnam War. These speakers don't just lecture for an hour and half and bore the students half to death when they visit; they explain their experiences during the Vietnam War by interacting with the students. The students then have the chance to ask them questions and the speaker answers the questions to the best of their ability. After the last speaker visited, I was so thankful to have met so many different people who had their own perspectives of the Vietnam War.

In early March of 2008, Ms. Poling informed our class that it was time to start our linking project, which is when we are linked with a Vietnam Veteran and we are to email questions to our links about their experiences during the Vietnam War. She gave all of us a sheet of paper with a list of names we had to choose from. As she went through the list with us, I skimmed through the names and I found a Vietnam Veteran who was a POW during the Vietnam War. I circled his name, so I would remember that he was a possibility, and continued listening to Ms. Poling read the names and their biographies. Within a few minutes, she read the name Colonel Bill Mayall. I glanced down at my sheet and I realized he was the name that I circled. I immediately raised my hand, and after Ms. Poling was done reading his biography to the class, she realized I wanted him as my link. She wrote my name down on her sheet of paper next to Col. Mayall's name and continued on reading the names. As I sat at my desk, reading the short biography of Col. Mayall, I asked myself if I had made the right choice.

Ms. Poling gave us time in class to write our first letter to our links. I must have rewritten my first letter about five times because I wanted to be sure to make a good first impression. Besides my name and age, I included what activities I was involved in at school, where I would be attending college, why I was taking LOV and of course, I included four questions for Col. Mayall to respond to. On March 10, 2008, I sent my first email to Col. Mayall. I received an email back from him the next day; I was not

expecting him to email me back so quickly! The following day I responded back and little did I know that our link exchanges would be something that I would take pleasure in throughout the rest of the semester. I was very nervous about this link exchanging with a person whom I didn't even know, but at the end, it was worth it. Because Ms. Poling allows her students to do this, I have created a special relationship with Col. Mayall that I hope lasts for a very long time. The minimum email exchanges that Ms. Poling required were six emails each. I had a total of nineteen emails that I sent to Col. Mayall alone, and of course, he sent the same amount back. I am not saying this to brag about how many link exchanges I had with my link, but to let future students of this class realize that they to can create a very special relationship with a Vietnam Veteran just like I have; you just need to be willing to do it. It was an amazing experience that I would not give up for any reason.

Every spring semester, for three days, Ms. Poling takes about thirty students to Washington, D.C. When she told our class about the field trip, I was not sure if I wanted to go or not. I then realized that I had never been to Washington, D.C. before. I came to the conclusion that this would be the perfect opportunity to visit our nation's capital and that it might be a fun field trip. I turned out to be right. It was the most emotional and memorable trip of my life. My favorite part of the trip was visiting the Vietnam War Memorial. As I reflect on what I've learned in *Lessons of Vietnam*, being in front of the Wall, and rubbing a soldier's name at the Wall, it just brings me to tears because I now understand the meaning of the Wall. As I remember staring at all the names on the Wall, it reminds me that all those names were men who went to school like me, who had dreams for the future like me, who had family and friends like mine, and some who were as young as I am now. Not only did I enjoy visiting the Wall for the first time, but I also had the pleasure of meeting Colonel Bill Mayall, my Vietnam Veteran link. When Ms. Poling told me that Col. Mayall would be meeting us at the Wall, I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was excited because at that point in time, I had been enjoying emailing Col. Mayall and reading about his experience in Vietnam. I was nervous because I knew I wanted to make a good impression when I met him, but I am very shy when I meet someone, whom I hardly know, in person. When the moment came to walk up to him and ask for his help to find a name at the Wall, he smiled and immediately

started conversing with me and, of course, he was more than happy to help me find the names I wanted to rub. Before the trip, I wasn't sure about whose name I would rub at the Wall. I finally decided to look up a soldier's name that died on my birthday (September 2) and I would rub his name at the Wall. At the end of my search, I wrote down the name John A. Futo. He was born on September 1, 1948 and he was killed on September 2, 1969; he had just turned 21. After learning this, I told myself I had to rub his name. After rubbing John Futo's name at the Wall, I asked Col. Mayall if there were any names on the Wall that he knew. He said there were two, and I rubbed both their names. My visit to the Vietnam War Memorial and meeting Col. Mayall will always be a special memory that I will hold in my heart forever.

Lessons of Vietnam is not just a course that teaches you the dates of events that happened during a war in our country's history; it is not your typical history class. This course teaches you history in a different way than just reading it out of the book. From the documentaries, to the speakers, to the linking project, Ms. Poling has proved to me that learning history does matter so it never repeats itself. Even though some may not admit it, there are lessons that my generation should be learning from the Vietnam War. I am grateful that I have learned those lessons and I will use what I've learned from this course to teach others who need a better understanding of the Vietnam War.