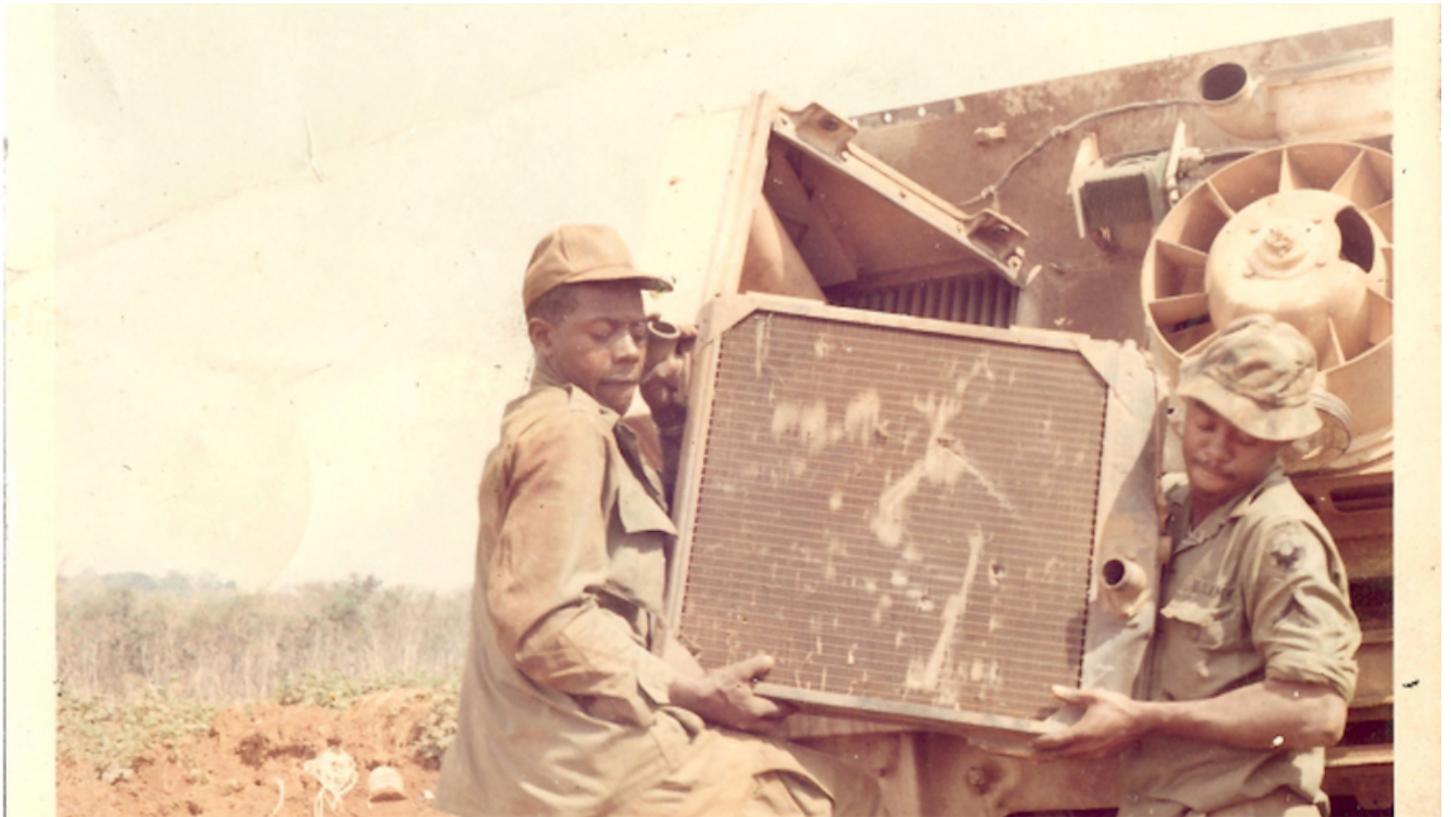


"The First Saddest Day of my Life": A Vietnam War Story

By Sharon D. Raynor, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.19.17

Word Count **723**

Level **820L**



LLouis Raynor (left) at work with a comrade during the Vietnam War. The photo is from 1967 or 1968. Courtesy of Sharon D. Raynor

I learned about the Vietnam War from my father, Louis Raynor. At 13 years old, I discovered an old, tattered, leather-bound diary in my parents' chest of drawers with my father's handwriting. Over the years, my father answered many questions about Vietnam.

The Vietnam War was a long and deadly struggle. It began in 1954 and lasted until 1975. America got involved in a civil war going on in Vietnam, a small country in Asia. Many American men were drafted, which meant they were forced to enter the army.

My father was drafted and entered the military in 1966 at age 18. He spent 17 weeks in training. Then on September 24, 1967, he said goodbye to his family and girlfriend in North Carolina and boarded an airplane to Vietnam.

Diary at hand

My father started writing in a small, leather-covered diary. He served with the 3rd Squad/5th Cavalry, 9th Infantry Division. His specialty was repairing vehicles. He either kept the diary in his trunk or inside his uniform wrapped in plastic to protect it from rain.

Inside the front cover of the diary, he wrote all of his essential personal information. The diary covers his time in Vietnam. It lasted from September 24, 1967, to September 23, 1968.

On September 24, 1967, he wrote, "The first saddest day of my life so far. It was time for me to depart from the ones I loved so dear to go to spend 365-day tour in Viet-Nam. 12 months."

Daily rundown

He writes about the many letters he wrote and received from home. He mentions the weather, the food, his daily duties as a soldier, the patrol missions, and his different locations. He also talks about the number of American soldiers and their enemy, the Viet Cong (VC), killed during battle.

On October 7, 1967, he wrote, "We go out on our first live patrol mission. A long day and night. I carried my friend, the M16 rifle. It rained all night. I had to lay in the mud and water during the night."

His other duties were quite routine for a soldier. He worked in the kitchen, filled sandbags to build bunkers and went on mission patrols. He also worked on repairing vehicles.

On February 2, 1968, he wrote that the Viet Cong attacked. His group lost a tank and some men. His men spent a "long-long" night under attack.

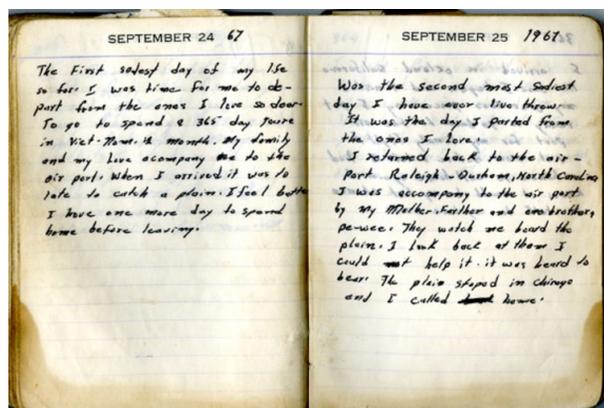
Recipient of four medals

For his service in Vietnam and 36 months in the U.S. Army, Louis Raynor was awarded four medals. At one point he was wounded in a gas explosion but still continued on active duty. He was honorably discharged on September 7, 1969.

In an interview, my father shared that it was hard to talk about his experience back home. "No one seemed to care about my time in Vietnam. ... Everyone looked at me like I had done something bad."

It was easier to keep quiet, he said.

When his health began to get worse, he started going to a Veterans Outreach Center to help him deal with illnesses and injuries from being in the army, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There, he realized it was better to talk about it and get help. "I never realized that staying away from home was not protecting my family from those things I never talked about. Distancing myself



from them only pushed them further away. I now realize that all those years I spent fighting this battle alone only made me weaker and angrier. It sometimes takes a very strong man to admit that he needs help. I feel that all veterans should have the opportunity and privilege to sit down and share their memories with one another," he said.

Sharing his stories "has made a tremendous difference" to him and his family, he said.

Sharon D. Raynor is an associate professor of English at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina. She is the author of "Memories of War: Trauma and Silence in the Narratives of Black Vietnam Veterans" and many oral history projects on the Vietnam War.



Quiz

- 1 What is a relationship between the narrator and the Vietnam War?
- (A) The narrator fought in the Vietnam War.
 - (B) The narrator has no connection to the war.
 - (C) The narrator's father fought in the Vietnam War.
 - (D) The narrator wrote in her diary about the war.
- 2 Fill in the blank in the sentence below.
Overall, the article is organized around ____.
- (A) a father and his family
 - (B) a war veteran and a diary
 - (C) a war and a country
 - (D) a soldier and a mission
- 3 According to the article, how does Louis overcome his PTSD?
- (A) He admires his awards for brave service in the war.
 - (B) He learns to share his memories with others.
 - (C) He finally lets go of his wartime diary.
 - (D) He spends quality time with fellow veterans.
- 4 What can you learn from the article's section titled "Recipient of four medals"?
- (A) Louis changed his view on sharing his war experiences.
 - (B) All Vietnam War soldiers suffered from PTSD.
 - (C) Men prefer to not share their feelings and emotions with others.
 - (D) The diary Louis kept won awards for its details of the Vietnam War.