



True American Hero

An Interview with Leo Gomez

By Lauren McCabe

Sports are what kept him in school and he graduated from his high school in 1967. He was fiercely active when he was younger, and had the honor of becoming captain of the varsity basketball team his senior year. When receiving the news of his draft it did not surprise Leo. He and a few of his buddies were planning on enlisting, but thought it might be better to wait and see how the draft pick went. Leo Gomez was twenty years old when he was drafted into the United States Army.

Leo immediately left home for his first course of basic training in El Paso, Texas. The physical training was a breeze for him. Due to his active sports career in high school, the physical requirements made on the recruits did not bother Leo. He scored 450 points out of 500 on the basic test. In the first days of the training he met many new people, surprisingly many from the areas in Arizona where he grew up. Leo states, "It was a blast and very interesting at the training camp." A few weeks later his group moved to a base in Louisiana, which was similar to the terrain and climate of Vietnam. It had many trees and it was cold, miserable, and he never made many friends there. Soon after camp, Leo went home on leave for approximately a week before he was sent on his way to Vietnam.

On January 31, 1968, many young soldiers, including Leo, were sent to Saigon. It was the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration, known as Tet. A truce had been agreed to and all the fighting and bombing for that day was to be halted. Sadly, the Vietcong did not abide by this edict. Many of the outlying cities and hamlets were attacked. The pilot received word that Saigon was under attack and could not land the plane as planned. It would take 22 hours in the air on this little plane flying in complete darkness before they finally landed safely somewhere in the jungle. The pilot successfully landed in a field with absolutely no lights around. Leo's first reaction was fear, and as he stepped off the plane holding onto the soldier's belt buckle in front of him, he instantly was assaulted with the intense smell that had washed over him, realizing it was death and things yet to come.

After arriving at the camp, Leo was informed that it was a replacement station. They gave the men clothing and duffel bags but no weapons. The men were at this station for three days before they received their first set of orders. Leo and his men were to be sent to Bear Cat,

which was part of the 9th Infantry Division, 20 miles north of Saigon. During the time he was there Leo had the opportunity to meet Sammy Morales. Sammy and Leo became fast friends; Sammy soon introduced Leo to many new people. They worked well together, were always having a good time, and Sammy loved showing Leo new and exciting things.

Leo and the 9th Infantry's job was in reconnaissance. During recon missions they flew in helicopters, sometimes four at a time, with six infantrymen in each helicopter. The pilots would drop Leo and his team off in a special coordinated area; then Leo and his fellow soldiers would search and find out where the enemy was so other divisions would be able to go in and defeat the enemy. The mission was to look for the North Vietnamese infantries and battalions, who would sleep during the day and travel during the night. It was already hard enough to search for them in the jungle, let alone at night, but they did it. After Leo and his men successfully located the enemy, a huge wave of soldiers would come in and engage in battles with the North Vietnamese battalions that they found. For three or four months the men went out on these missions. By this time it was just a fact of life, something Leo did every day. The group saw some battles, but nothing Leo would describe as big and bad.

Unfortunately, Leo's everyday experiences would alter on Sunday, April 21, 1968. Leo would engage in what would be his last battle and it would ultimately change his life forever. Leo and his team had been doing recon all day long, the day was winding down, and the sun was setting. His platoon had one last place to check for the enemy before heading back to camp. They were all excited to go back to the barracks to drink beer and hang out with their buddies. Little did they know that a cold beer and relaxation would not end up on the agenda after all.

On this day two helicopters filled with six men each landed in a small clearing. Six men on one helicopter ran towards the jungle; Leo's group of six stayed behind in the middle of a little clearing. They had no idea there was a battalion with a couple thousand Vietcong not too far into the jungle right where six of their men were headed. These North Vietnamese soldiers were sleeping since it was the middle of the day, which helped out in their favor. There were only twelve of Leo's team and 1,000 to 5,000 Vietcong. First, Leo and a few others looked into foxholes where the Vietcong usually hid, throwing grenades into the holes to kill any unknown enemies. One of the foxholes had Vietcong soldiers in it; they tried to make a run for it so they could alert their fellow soldiers. Leo, a bit of a track star, ran after them because it was important that the other enemy combatants not be warned of the American soldiers. Leo was very close to getting hold of one of the soldiers but it was too late; the enemy had been alerted. Upon waking, the other VC soldiers started shooting at Leo and his men. Leo was hit in the back and tumbled forward; he did not think anything of it. He told himself that it was not a big deal, just a little scratch. The two Vietcong Leo had been chasing disappeared into the tree line and at that precise moment the battle began.

The first shots were fired right around 4 p.m. at a distance of 60 to 200 yards away. The American soldiers had no idea what direction the shots were coming from. Six of Leo's team hid behind a small dike. Because the enemy was shooting from too far away, it would have been a huge waste of ammo, ammo they might need for later. They sat behind the dike with shots firing in their direction waiting for their sergeant to call the next orders. Suddenly, two US jets flew over their heads as they lay behind the little dike. Leo and the men sat there and watched the jets drop bombs in the vicinity of the North Vietnamese soldiers. Leo was unaware that the sergeant had made an airstrike call to hit the field about 400 yards away. Sadly, the other six men in the group, including Leo's good friend Sammy Morales, were killed instantly.

The jets kept bombing the area around them for about an hour. Shooting had once again started and the Vietcong began to close in on Leo and the remaining men who still hid behind the little sixteen to eighteen-inch dike. As the enemy started inching closer, Leo and the men started shooting, glad they had not wasted their ammo at an earlier time. Leo shot with his M79 grenade launcher, which he liked best because it killed anything near its landed shot, but it was a hard weapon to maneuver in the jungle. Leo equates this time as looking like *Star Wars*—bright lights, loud noises, and shots coming from every direction possible. Leo had no idea how many people he was hurting or killing and it went on for what seemed like forever. Suddenly Vietcong started coming up on the sides of the dike where Leo and five of his fellow soldiers were hiding. Leo had no choice but to expose himself to the enemy in an attempt to save his men. He rolled around the dike and in a prone position rapidly fired at the enemy with his M79. Unfortunately, a flare lit up the sky showing his position to the enemies shooting. In an area from which the flare had been lit, Leo heard screaming, followed by utter silence.

All of a sudden Leo felt warmth on his shoulder and he was looking at the sky. He realized they had shot him with an AK-47 and it flipped him on his back. By this time the battle had waged on for almost eight hours. Leo had no idea what was going on. He could not move and he could not feel his right arm. His friend was touching all over to find out where he had been hit and how bad it was and discovered Leo had an extremely bad shoulder wound. He rolled around the dike to alert the sergeant, “Shorty,” about Leo’s injury. Shorty came over to check out Leo’s wound and proceeded to call the helicopters that had just been there to come back and pick Leo up because he was going to bleed to death. They said they could not land because there was too much action. Leo was not in any pain because he could not feel anything; however, it was apparent to his sergeant that if they did not get Leo to safety he would not make it out alive. The men devised a plan to get Leo away from the action and into a safe place so he could get the help he needed. The plan was to get the two helicopters to hover above the area to make a lot of dust, so when the rescue chopper came down to retrieve Leo the remaining guys could put him on and he would be flown away to safety. The plan was successful. Fifteen minutes later they landed at a M.A.S.H. unit. The last thing Leo remembers were the doctors and nurses running to get him from the stretcher. He finally woke up two days later.

He awakened to a beautiful nurse at his bedside, along with men trying to figure out who he was because he had no identification on him. They were asking Leo questions in order to identify him. All he can remember is wanting water; he was so thirsty. Unfortunately, they tried to use this against him and would not give him water until he had answered questions, but Leo needed water so he just kept saying, “water, water...” Finally they gave him a little wet sponge and put it to his lips; then he answered their questions. As soon as medically possible, Leo was shipped to Saigon. In that Saigon hospital Leo turned to his left and saw three men who looked familiar. One was Sergeant “Shorty” and the other two could not talk. Sergeant “Shorty” told Leo that they got pretty beaten up in a battle and that is why they ended up in the same hospital. Shortly thereafter, Leo was sent to Japan for five weeks for rest and re-cooperation. They told him his collarbone, due to his wound, could not be repaired; still to this day it is broken in half. Leo was sent to a hospital in El Paso, Texas, to recover. Unfortunately there was no military hospital in Arizona. Leo spent almost a year in that hospital recovering and doing therapy. It took him six months to lift a broomstick that was held out in front of him and then he graduated to weights trying to rebuild the strength he once had. Eventually, Leo regained his strength and a good amount of function in his arm. Sadly, at the end of his two-year service the government gave Leo a zero percent disability rate.

After Leo returned home he started working as a mailman for the United States Postal Service. He was not given benefits from the Army because of the zero percent disability. So he went to the VA to get the benefits he deserved, and walked out with a ten percent disability rate. Soon after that he married his first wife and they had a beautiful baby girl named Stacey. His marriage was hard because he was not used to being at home all the time, so after fifteen years of marriage Leo and his wife divorced. A few years later he met Miss Lydia Tijerina and they have been married for twenty years now. The family became a blended one. Mrs. Gomez already had three kids and Leo had one. He is very happy.

Leo said the most difficult part was the protesters and the treatment the soldiers received when they came back. Everyone hated the soldiers and did not respect what they did over in Vietnam. Many men came back with drug or alcohol problems. It was very traumatic for them after the war, but Leo to this day tries to make the best of every day.

As the writer, I am so grateful that I got the opportunity to hear and share Leo's amazing story. Leo is what I would like to think of as a hero. Anyone willing to risk his life to save millions of people he has never met is considered a hero. He was injured in this war and still is able to share his moving story. It was truly an honor and I will never forget hearing his story. I am thankful to Leo for opening up and allowing me to share his story with all who would like to read it. Thank you, Leo Gomez, for your service and your story. You are a true American hero.

***Lauren McCabe** is a senior at Shadow Mountain High School in Phoenix and has been in Veterans Heritage Project for two years. She got involved in VHP to earn her Gold Award. "Working with Mrs. Burr, our advisor, and Leo Gomez, the veteran I interviewed, has been an awesome experience and it will be something I will always remember. I grew up in Dallas, Texas, and moved here when I was five and I could not be happier. I love to help other people and volunteering is something that has always brought me joy. Being in Girl Scouts I have learned a lot about who I am as a person and by helping others you can also help yourself. I love the people around me and the opportunities life has to offer and am very grateful for this honor to spread the amazing stories of our American Heroes."*

***Leo Gomez** was drafted into the United States Army after graduating from high school in 1967. He served in Vietnam from 1967 to 1969 where he and the 9th Infantry performed reconnaissance missions to look for North Vietnamese infantries and battalions who slept during the day. Leo received a Purple Heart after being wounded in an eight-hour firefight with the North Vietnamese. Upon returning from Vietnam, Leo worked as a mailman for the United States Postal Service. Leo is now happily married with four children.*