Overview/ Description of Project: I grew up listening to stories about the Vietnam War from my grandfather, Naval officer Scott Wilson, Sr. of the minesweeper USS Reaper. It was not until my junior year of high school when *The Vietnam War* (Ken Burns, 2017) was released that I understood my grandfather to be a veteran: a young soldier in an enigmatic and gruesome war. This realization shocked me, but what shocked me more was the realization that my generation had been unaware of the horrors and truths of the Vietnam War. My project, *Veterans of Vietnam: Then and Now*, aims to give Vietnam War veterans the opportunity and platform to share their wartime experiences with each other and American civilians, including civilians from their generation and my generation. I will travel across America to interview and photograph veterans holding a photograph of themselves from the war. The juxtaposition of “Then” (the photograph of the veterans' younger selves) and “Now” (the portrait of them now) will remind all generations, especially my own, that these older men were once young men in their teens and early twenties sent into a horrifying situation. By interviewing and photographing Vietnam veterans, my project will create a bridge for veterans and civilians to communicate with each other and within their communities, ensuring that veterans’ experiences and the Vietnam War will not be forgotten. The project will foster peace on at least two levels: first, by helping veterans scarred by war (any war) feel less isolated by their experiences; second, by helping visitors grapple with the true costs of war in order to prevent future conflicts.

Preparation: During my senior year of high school, I interviewed and photographed Vietnam veterans and curated a show at my high school with the intention of reminding older generations and teaching my generation about the forgotten experience of the Vietnam veteran. The practice of interviewing and photographing veterans in the greater Los Angeles area helped to train me to execute this project on a national scale this summer. For the spring 2020 semester, I have created an independent study to prepare myself for my project. Under the guidance of my academic advisor and photography professor, Justin Kimball, I will refine the photographic process I will use this summer. As research assistant for Mark Jacobson, the John J. McCloy ’16 Professor of American Institutions and International Diplomacy, and a former combat veteran, I am researching the exit of the last Americans from Vietnam in 1975, and will be interviewing these diplomats and soldiers with Professor Jacobson; some of their stories will be included in my website. Among the organizations that have endorsed this proposal are Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), The United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration, Witness to War Foundation, Associates of the Vietnam Veterans of America (AVVA), and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA). In their official letter of support, the VVAW said, "We remain committed to the struggle for peace and for social and economic justice for all people," and said my project “aligns with our mission.” The VVA wrote, "We feel strongly that Emma’s interviews and photographs will contribute to a deeper understanding of the price of war on those whom we send into battle, and on their families and their communities.” The VVA has offered me access to every one of their 1,400 locations, and both the VVA and the VVAW will email their entire client list explaining my project and the dates I will be visiting. Asked to evaluate my project and approach, Prof. Jacobson wrote, “I was particularly taken by her ability to handle the emotionally charged discussions that took place with the Veterans. That is hard enough for an experienced interview who is a Veteran to handle--as I can personally attest to--and she was able to maintain a high degree of empathy while also remaining a detached observer.”

Research and Demonstrated Need: From the successful lawyer to the homeless heroin addict who is living on the streets of Los Angeles, the 75 year-old veterans I have previously interviewed still have difficulty processing their pain and relating to those without combat experience. 2.7 million men served in-country (on land) and in-sea (on the sea) during the Vietnam War, and every year 1.5% of this population...
The United Mine Workers of America stated that as of March 2019, there are only 850,000 veterans left, and roughly 40,500 veterans die per year. It is of the greatest importance that this project is conducted while many veterans are still alive and able to recall their experiences. The Wall of Faces is an incredible platform that both connects veterans and civilians and helps the viewer attempt to grasp the enormous amount of loss that the Vietnam War caused. This website, which displays a photograph of each soldier that died in Vietnam, serves as a place for all to view the dead, but there are few resources that allow the public to interact with living veterans. While it is important to honor those who died, it is equally as important to recognize those who are alive to tell their stories. My project will help those civilians who were alive during the Vietnam War—and especially those who were born long after it—to understand the war’s complicated and painful legacy. It will also drive home the lifelong costs of war for those who serve.

**Implementation Strategy:**

**Website** The website will present the portraits of every interviewed veteran in a grid, allowing the viewer to choose which veteran they would like to view. Upon clicking on a portrait, the viewer will be presented with the main portrait, a close up of the photograph the veteran is holding, and an audio clip of the interview. The veteran’s voice in the audio recording will further humanize their story through a screen. There will also be a comment section under each photograph, allowing veterans and civilians to comment their thoughts, stories, or questions. **Phase 1:** In Spring 2020, I will construct the template for the website and refine my portrait technique. I will work with the VVA to establish dates for my trip and will set up appointments at each VVA location to ensure at least three to four veteran interviews per location. I will also create a release form which each veteran will sign so that the veterans understand the project and the project is protected on the website. **Phase 2:** For the first eight weeks of my project, I will be travelling by car to up to eight major cities that have VVA locations, including Las Vegas, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Tallahassee, Montgomery, Austin, and Phoenix. This allows me one week in each location, enabling me to travel to nearby VVA locations if necessary and sufficient time to complete thoughtful interviews. For the interviews, I will have a list of questions to ask each veteran. Inevitably, the conversation may diverge from the set questions, which I will encourage. I will audio record every interview. **Phase 3:** For the final four weeks of my project, I will edit the recordings of the interviews into shorter clips (2 to 5 minutes) and edit the portraits. I will then insert the audio clips and portraits to the website. In addition to giving flash drives with the original portraits and interviews to each VVA location, I will email digital copies of the final portraits to each veteran that I interviewed. As I live in Los Angeles, I will complete four interviews over the course of these four weeks, as well.

**Assessment/Reflection:** During my trip, I will be sending my photographs to my advisor and photography professor, Justin Kimball, for critiques. Since Prof. Jacobson has conducted multiple veteran interviews, I will have him review the short audio clips to ensure each clip is profound and succinct in its content. My project will be a success if the website serves as a platform for viewers to converse about the Vietnam War. My wish is that civilian viewers of the website feel as though they have gained a new knowledge of the war that they did not have before. As my initial interest with the war stemmed from my generation’s lack of knowledge about it, I want people of my generation to be able to access Veterans of Vietnam: Then and Now for years to come so that they can understand the cost of war and acknowledge the stigma associated with Vietnam veterans. However, if the website solely serves as a safe space for veterans to share their stories, then this project will also be a success.

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