

COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR LEON CAFFIE

When Leon Caffie was drafted into the Army in 1970 during the Vietnam war, he had no idea that it was the beginning of a military career that would span four decades. Nor did he imagine that he would end his career serving as Command Sergeant Major of the U.S. Army Reserves.

Command Sergeant Major Caffie retired January 9, 2010, as one of the last draftees into the Vietnam war still serving in the military today.

Caffie described being drafted in 1970 as “a focus moment,” in his life.

“It was inevitable that it was going to happen,” he said. “In some aspects I was looking forward to it...I wanted to do my duty.”

He had already discussed the possibility with his father, who told him “you gotta do what you gotta do,” Caffie said. “Not being drafted wasn’t an option.”

“He’s my hero,” Caffie said of his father. “He’s the person I go to first for advice.”

Caffie described the experience of landing in Vietnam as a Private First Class in September of 1970 as “surreal.”

“It was 10 p.m. at night,” he said. “You would see the tracers coming in, you could see the tracers going out. It makes you think ‘this is the real deal,’ he said.

“First night in the jungle was an eye opening experience. There wasn’t much sleep. But you learn to adapt,” Caffie said.

Having buddies, Caffie said, is key in adjusting to and dealing with a deployment.

“Buddies help you overcome fears,” he said. “You depend on your buddies.”

Origin and ethnicity weren’t a big part of the bond between buddies, Caffie said. Rather it was that they were soldiers together and depended on each other.

In part it was the relationships he built in the Army that inspired Caffie to stay in the U.S. Army Reserves after returning from Vietnam.

Caffie returned from his deployment to Vietnam in July of 1971. Even though he’d been encouraged by a former First Sergeant he’d served with to stay in active duty, Caffie entered the inactive reserve in 1972. He used the G.I. Bill to go to college. But he chose to join an Army Reserve unit in Gainesville, Fla., in 1974



Gainesville, FL

Distinguished Service Medal

“I missed it,” he said. “I missed the esprit de corps. I missed the brotherhood. I missed being a member of a proud organization. I missed the uniform. Those were the driving factors.”

For as much as Caffie was present for changes to the U.S. Army Reserves over the past three decades, he did his part to affect change himself.

Working until he reached a level of authority gave him the power to make changes that would benefit the lives of the soldiers below him, he said.

“I saw a need to be inclusive,” he said, “regardless of ethnicity or gender.”

“It’s never been about me. It’s always been about the soldiers,” he said. “The young men and women who make enormous sacrifices...These young kids step forward, raise their hands and say ‘I do.’”

Caffie deployed to Iraq in November of 2002. Unlike his arrival in Vietnam as a Private First Class, this time Caffie arrived on the ground as a Sergeant Major. The difference between the two experiences, Caffie said, was “drastic.” He served in this deployment as the Command Sergeant Major of the 377th Theater Support Command, overseeing 43,500 soldiers, as well as servicemembers from the other branches, he said.

HEROES

Caffie was faced with a series of challenges in this deployment.

"We were saddled with departures in key positions," he said, which mean he had to "reach down to find people and elevate them to a higher level."

Working in combat support, Caffie used battle focus training on his soldiers, he said. Ultimately, he said, he felt good about the progress they made.

Caffie leaves his career in the military having earned many medals for his service. Too many to enumerate individually, they include the Bronze Star Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, and the Distinguished Service Medal, which honors his service all the way through last decade of his career and his service in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

But the thing Caffie says he will take away more than anything are the faces, the joy, and the laughter of the men and women, --the soldiers he has served with.

