

From the Mekong Delta to ASU: A Vietnam veteran's journey

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
November 6, 2025

Wayne Johnson's story is one of persistence across decades.

A Vietnam veteran and a father, he had always dreamed of teaching at the college level. That dream, however, kept being delayed by the realities of life: raising a family, building a career and simply surviving the ups and downs that came his way.

Finally, more than 50 years after earning a bachelor's degree from Florida State University, the next step toward his dream was realized when he walked across the stage again — this time with a master's degree in international affairs and leadership from Arizona State University's [School of Politics and Global Studies](#) through [ASU Online](#).

The moment wasn't just about a diploma. It was about closing a circle that had remained open for half a century.

His journey back to the classroom wasn't easy. Technology had completely transformed education, and Johnson found himself navigating online platforms, digital research and modern academic standards. But the challenge energized him. Professors and classmates alike admired his discipline and the perspective he brought to discussions, forged from years of lived experience rather than textbooks alone.

The media took notice, too. [ASU News](#) and various local news outlets spotlighted him not only as a graduate but as a symbol of lifelong learning — a reminder that it's never too late to pursue unfinished goals.

Now, with degree in hand, Johnson looks toward the future with renewed purpose. He plans to step into the classroom again; this time, not as a student but as a guest lecturer at the high school and college level, sharing both knowledge and the resilience it took him a lifetime to earn.

Now, 50 years after the end of the Vietnam War and as part of ASU's annual [Salute to Service](#) celebration, Johnson spoke to ASU News from his home in Houston to share his thoughts on the war, his Army service and what it means to him today.

Question: What motivated you to serve in the Vietnam War?

Johnson: For some unknown reason, I flunked out of my first year of college, and my draft board offered me a job. I was offered an opportunity to attend Officer Candidate School at the induction center. A little over a year later, at only 20 years old, on Nov. 20, 1967, I was an infantry second lieutenant. The maturity gained in that year served me well for the rest of my life.

Q: What was your first impression when you arrived in Vietnam?

A: I had already spent a month in the Philippine islands, as my dad was stationed at Clark Air Force Base, so I was accustomed to the climate. On the flight in, I remember I could smell Vietnam before we could see land. My first impression was a blur as I went through processing and was assigned to Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion (Mechanized), 47th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division, in the Mekong Delta. When I arrived at my unit, I met my company commander in a bunker guarding the Ben Luc bridge just south of Saigon. A hot, dirty, primitive area, I was unfamiliar with the armored personnel carrier M-113. I wondered what I would do the first time I made contact with the enemy. I was a platoon leader in a combat assignment who had never actually led a platoon! Unsure, scared and bewildered, I was somewhat comforted by the fact that I had been raised in the military and had a basic understanding of command.

Q: Can you share a memory — good or bad — that has stayed with you the most?

A: I'll share two. The first is about the first time I was actually in contact with a Viet Cong unit. Without hesitation, I did my job. My training kicked in and I led my platoon.

The second is the last day I was in Vietnam. We had been in a running firefight all night. That morning, I saw the company commander's radio telephone operator reaching for what I believed to be a booby-trapped sign, and I tried to stop him. I was a second too slow. Kenny died, many others were wounded and I wound up in the hospital for three months and was transferred back to the States.

Q: How did your service impact your life once you returned home?

A: Several ways. First, at 22, I was far more mature than the civilian world was willing to accept. Every Vietnam veteran had far more life experience than the civilian world was prepared to acknowledge or accept. We were already old.

Second, for the next 30 years, I had to contend with how uncomfortable people were with the knowledge that I had been a combat platoon leader. I learned to leave off any mention of my service on resumes and not to talk about Vietnam.

Lastly, I had to deal with the effects of PTSD without knowing what it was or what to do about it. Perhaps the most telling experience happened in 2004 when I was receiving treatment at the VA, and the wives met. My wife told me as we were leaving that for the first time, she realized she was not alone. Other wives had been dealing with "us" for their whole marriages.

Q: What do you wish more people understood about Vietnam veterans and their experiences?

A: Even today, this applies to the entire civilian world concerning every veteran who has served in a combat zone — from Vietnam to the 20-year War on Terror. The military trains us to be soldiers; no matter the service, we are taught to be military. There is no training given on how to become a

civilian again. None.

For most of the Vietnam veterans, they were in the field in combat three days before being sent back to the States. Two days before, they were in their base camp, turning in their equipment. One day before, they were on airplanes returning. The next day, they were home. In three days, they were to go from being a combat soldier with more responsibility than any civilian their age could imagine to being expected to be the boy on the block they were just two or three years ago — an impossible transition.

Q: What does military service mean to you?

A: I was raised in the military. Service was always understood in the terms of duty, honor, country. It was understood that there was a duty, a responsibility, to protect the Constitution of the United States — not a person, but the Constitution, from all enemies, both foreign and domestic. I believe that responsibility also extends to each and every citizen.

While on active duty, there is an obligation to follow all legal orders and to live by a standard of discipline that requires personal sacrifice. There is a code of conduct each soldier commits to that requires honor and integrity above that required by civilian life. We commit to being in a constant state of mental, physical and emotional readiness to protect the United States above all else in our lives.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Wayne Johnson holds a portrait of his younger self, from when the Vietnam veteran served in the military. Photo by EJ Hernandez