

American History professor offers unique perspective of Vietnam War

UPEI Professor was an American citizen until moving to P.E.I. with his wife two years ago

By Krista MacLean

The Cadre

Each one of us carries a little piece of history. For many, it is the heritage and ancestry that accompanies their surname. For others, it is the memory of an experience that made an impact on their life and the world. For Bruce Craig, it is a tattered piece of newspaper he keeps neatly folded and tucked away in his wallet.

Craig, a professor of American History at UPEI, called the United States home until two years ago when he and his wife moved to the Island. During the 1960s he experienced an important part of American history, an experience he shares with students when he talks about the Vietnam War.

"The 60s were a very turbulent time in the U.S.," recalls Craig in his sparsely decorated office.

"The Vietnam War was such a divisive experience for Americans. A lot of people were scarred as a result of it."

Although Craig admits he "was basically not affected" by the war, the way in which he and his brothers dealt with the draft highlights what it must have been like to have your fate in someone else's hand.

"My eldest brother joined the International Guard and basically avoided going to Vietnam by being a reservist. My middle brother was in school and he stayed in school in order to avoid the draft, the avoidance of the draft being his main objective," he said.

Craig, the youngest brother, was least affected because of his age.

However, during the final years of the war he was old enough to be eligible for the draft, a significant day in his life represented by the yellowed square of newsprint he has kept for so many years.

"I was in the very last draft pool," he explains as he unfolds the small piece of paper. "This was the

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announcement in the newspaper, the draft pool."

Columns of dates and numbers line the paper. Each date is accompanied by a number, and the number connected to your birth date would become your draft number, said Craig.

"If you were 1-80 you were definitely drafted."

Craig was 355.

"I knew I was safe."

Unlike his brothers, avoiding the draft had never weighed heavily on Craig's mind.

"If I had a low number I would have had to figure my options," he said.

"I didn't contemplate what I'd be doing had that been the case. By the time I was in the draft pool the war

was practically over and it was decided that Nixon was going to end the war and end the draft. Everyone knew that Nixon was looking for an exit strategy."

Although Craig considers the military to be a good career for many people, the draft system during Vietnam was "unfair," he said.

"Vietnam became a poor persons war. If you look at the pictures there were a large number of black and Hispanic soldiers. If you were able to stay in school, you were exempt from the draft. My brother stayed in school after he had received his masters for that reason, but many people wouldn't have had that option."

Nowadays, Vietnam is not something Craig thinks about often. He and his wife are settling into life in rural Prince Edward Island and are busy running a bed and breakfast in

North Lake, a property they bought five years ago. Craig, an accomplished author who has written over 100 articles and a number of books, plans to devote more time to writing and is currently working on a biography of alleged Soviet spy Alger Hiss.

Many of Craig's courses are quickly becoming popular as he gains a reputation as a knowledgeable and captivating professor, an expert in the Cold War and the history of espionage.

And for his part, Craig is finding his classes at UPEI equally as enjoyable.

"UPEI is unique and gratifying because the student doesn't get lost in the shuffle. There is a desire and dedication to teaching here that is frankly quite refreshing."

The toll of the Vietnam War

Casualties:

Vietnam: 250,000 dead; 1,170,000 wounded
U.S.A: 58,209 dead; 2,000 missing; 305,000 wounded
South Korea: 4,900 dead; 11,000 wounded
Australia: 520 dead; 2,400 wounded
New Zealand: 37 dead; 187 wounded
North Vietnam and NLF: 560,000 dead/missing; 600,000 wounded
P.R. China: 1,446 dead; 4,200 wounded

Vietnamese civilian dead: 2,000,000
Cambodian civilian dead: 700,000
Laotian civilian dead: 50,000

* all are approximations

Source: Wikipedia