

The New York Times

For Veterans Day, Some Former Military Officers Reflect on Lessons From Their Parents

The values that shaped them include leadership, optimism and charting your own course.



James Stavridis playing war games in 1963, long before he would become a four-star admiral. Credit...via James Stavridis

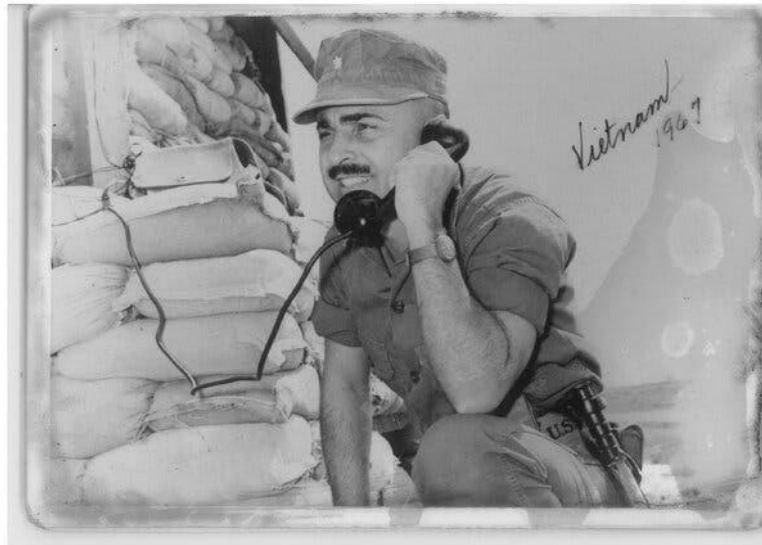
Debra Weiner is interviewing 100 newsmakers, thought leaders and other people who've made an outsize difference about the most valuable thing their parents taught them. Following are excerpts from a few of those stories, edited and condensed.

BELOW IS AN EXCERPT

Optimism

JAMES STAVRIDIS, retired U.S. Navy admiral

The 16th Supreme Allied Commander of NATO; former dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University; author of nine books, including a novel to be published in March.



James Stavridis's father, Colonel George Stavridis, in Vietnam in 1967. Credit...via James Stavridis

In 1922, my father's mother was living in Smyrna in western Turkey when the Greeks and Armenians were herded down to the harbor and the Turkish army burned the city behind them. She was rescued by Greek fisherman who came across the Aegean to bring them to Greece. In Athens, she met my grandfather and these two 20-somethings took a ship for America and went through Ellis Island.

My grandparents always believed that was a profoundly positive experience and transmitted that to my father. In all the 50-plus years I was around him, I never saw him fail to meet the moment with a sense that things will work out. Not in a Pollyanna way — he was a combat Marine; he saw plenty of the dark side of the world — but that if you move with a positive force and face the challenges in front of you, good would outdo evil in the long throw of a life.

In 1966, my dad was preparing to go to Vietnam for a one-year deployment. I was in middle school and watched him pack his sea bag and put it by the door. I think most people would have been pretty downbeat, thinking I'm getting on a plane in the morning and going into a combat situation. But my dad was so positive in conveying that he would be fine.

"I'm going with a battalion of 1,000 Marines to a coastal port called Da Nang. I am their commander. We protect each other. Our mission is to ensure that our ships can come in and out." He talked about how they would set up perimeter defenses. Fence barriers would be constructed. He took the esoteric idea of what he was going to be doing and surrounded it in my mind with reality and protection.

My father was a tennis player and spent a lot of time teaching me the game. I was in high school and would often be overmatched. I'd say to him, "I'll never beat that kid. He's ranked No. 2 in the state. I'm No. 20." But my dad would say, "No, no, no. Let's analyze his game. Where are his weaknesses? His strengths? And how do you counter them next time you meet? Even if you lose tactically, you can learn from it strategically."

I've thought about that a lot over the years. Your business may fail; you may get terminal cancer; you may have a relationship that fails. But even if there is significant failure, draw lessons from it and apply them to the next situation.

On 9/11, I was a newly selected, one-star admiral, and my office in the Pentagon was on the side where the airplane hit. I was 150 feet away, and watched it happen. In the Navy, you learn how to firefight, so my initial instinct was to run toward the explosion. But there was so much smoke, there was nothing I could do.

It took me 3 1/2 hours to walk home. My wife had no idea if I'd survived. We had a moment, then I called my father. Like everybody who would be honest about it, I was afraid. Afraid for the country, afraid for my family, afraid for what was happening. But my father snapped me out of it. He said, "We are not going to be taken down by a

terrorist organization. You're an officer in the U.S. military. You have to get back to the Pentagon. This is your moment. Admiral.”

That was not quite the last time I spoke with my father, but among the last. He died of an aneurysm days later, on Sept. 16. He was 76.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/well/family/for-veterans-day-some-former-military-officers-reflect-on-lessons-from-their-parents.html>