

DAVID L. JOHNSON grew up like many Minnesotans in the 1950s–60s. He spent summers outdoors, hunting and fishing when he wasn't playing sports, and was on his school's wrestling team. By the time he graduated from Kennedy Senior High in Bloomington, the U.S. was deeply entrenched in an unpopular war in Vietnam. Preempting the nearly inevitable draft, David enlisted in the army in June 1969. Six months later, he was serving as a combat medic on the army base at Dong Ha, the northernmost city in South Vietnam.

Superficially, David's letters from Vietnam aren't much different from those sent by any young person away from home. He writes about the weather, "wet most of the time"; requests "tang orange drink and canned spam"; and shares excitement over new purchases, like the Polaroid Instamatic camera that likely produced many of his poignantly beautiful Vietnam snapshots. His letters also reflect a growing disillusionment with the war: "From what I have seen in Vietnam we could win the war anytime we wanted. But what I think we[']re doing is trying to keep the war going in order to keep our economy [*sic*] going."

In reality, David's life in Vietnam was nothing like that of kids back home. In a letter dated May 10, he tells:

One of our tanks was driving alongside the road when 4 NVA [North Vietnamese Army] jumped up in front of them from behind some bushes[.] 2 of the guys on the tank were hit befor[e] they [k]new what was happening. The tank opened up with its 50 cal. machien [*sic*] gun and got all 4 NVA. When I got to the tank with the rest of the platoon I saw one of the guys that got hit laying on the ground. I took one look at him and [k]new he was dead.

David did make it back to Minnesota, though the effects of the war stayed with him long after his service ended. His death from liver cancer in 2001 was attributed to a disease contracted while serving in Vietnam. The papers of David Johnson, now in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, include letters, photographs, certificates, and commendations reflecting his military service and later involvement in veterans' organizations.

—Shelby Edwards, manuscripts collections assistant



JASON ONERHEIM/MNHS COLLECTIONS



#### About the Cover

Minnesota's gleaming white marble capitol was the product of many skilled hands: carpenters, bricklayers, plumbers, sheet-metal workers, hoisting engineers, iron workers, masons, and stonecutters. The sheer scale of the project dwarfs some of its fine details. Here, a skilled stone carver uses one of the era's innovations—a pneumatic chisel—to finish one of the 12 large marble eagles that encircle the capitol dome. For more on the capitol's stonecutters—their lives, work, hazards, and accomplishments—see the article beginning on page 4. (MNHS collections)



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