



John J. Kenney

Vietnam-Era, September 1972 to December 1974

John J. Kenney served in the military during the Vietnam-Era from September 1972 to December 1974. Following Boot Camp at Fort Dix, New Jersey, “Jay” was assigned to the U.S. Army Agency for Aviation Safety (USAAVS) at Fort Rucker, Alabama, as a Research Psychologist. He spent the next two years conducting research in human-factors engineering focusing on ways to improve rotary wing aircraft (helicopter) and pilot safety. He was also active in the Catholic Youth Organization and the Special Olympics for Army dependents and the local community.

Kenney recollected his first memories of the Vietnam War as a middle school student growing up in Rhode Island. At that time, he supported the war because “it was the American thing to do.” While in high school his views began to change as he started to “study more, read more, learn more and hear different opinions.” By this time, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. had delivered his seminal speech condemning the war as immoral and the Catholic Bishops had also publicly decried the war as unjust. While attending Southern Illinois University on a gymnastics’ scholarship, he was deeply influenced by the writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton as well as the anti-war activists, brother-priests Daniel and Phillip Berrigan. He also traveled to India to study Hinduism and Buddhism with the plan to attend graduate school there.

In August 1972, a couple of months after graduating from Southern Illinois University with a B.A. degree in Psychology, while working as a camp counselor for individuals with developmental disabilities, he received his draft notice. He reported to the draft board to fill out a questionnaire. When he reached the question asking him if he would ever find difficulty in obeying a superior officer’s command, he responded with an essay explaining how he believed this war was immoral and how he could not, in good conscience, participate. Kenney’s opposition to the war led to hours of being interviewed by psychologists and intelligence officers. After the military interview he decided he would take the oath to serve and boarded the bus along with many other newly drafted men to Fort Dix, New Jersey for Boot Camp.

Upon returning to civilian life, Kenney joined the Missionary Society of St. Paul (“The Paulist Fathers”) to study for the Catholic priesthood. He earned his M.A. in Theology from The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. He decided not to be ordained and went on to earn an MSW and PhD in Social Work from Catholic University, as well as an MBA at Southeastern University. He worked for Montgomery County Government for nearly 30 years, serving for 25 years as Chief, Aging and Disability Services in the Department of Health and Human Services. Retiring from Montgomery County in September 2018, he served as Chief Operating Officer for The Jewish Social Services Agency until December 2019. Kenney currently resides in Rockville with his wife Nancie and is the proud father of two children, Aidan and Brigit.