

Veterans

This morning, I was having breakfast with my 85 year old mother-in-law, LaVerna. She is the widow of Bobby Riddle, who was a United States Marine in WWII, a China Marine, a warrior. He passed away a number of years ago in an ignoble death, after breaking his hip and having a prolonged hospitalization. Bobby wasn't a super man, he was a veteran, and he had a large impact on me. I, too, am a veteran. I wish he'd a' been there this morning.

After breakfast, LaVerna went home. I went to the 11:00 a.m. Veteran's Memorial Service in our small town. It was a cold 37° F, overcast and blustery for such an important day. Regardless of weather, a Veteran's Day memorial in a small town is an august and dignified affair. It is performed with as much pomp and ceremony as any memorial performed in any large city or on any military camp, anywhere.

There were a lot of us old warriors there. Maybe it's not true, but it seems like rural America has a large proportion of old ex-warriors in its tender arms. There were insignias I hadn't seen, or thought of in years, proudly being displayed on hats, coats, banners. There was a fellow there, younger than me with a Red Horse Cap. Red Horse was, and may still be, a combat engineer operation. This "young" fellow was there with his lovely wife, and younger teenage son, all standing close by with arms around each other. There were ranger patches on sleeveless Levi jackets. There were Army, Air Force, and Navy insignia and rank emblems displayed proudly, and hundreds of American Flags waving, magnificently, in the chilly wind.

There were some local youngsters, and Reserves, who are either going in the next couple of months, or have been to Iraq and Afghanistan. There was an "old" man in a wheel chair with his heavy black woolen overcoat buttoned up and hugged tightly around him, his VFW garrison cap at a jaunty angle, his wife standing behind him proudly with her hands on his shoulder. There were a couple of wizened, gray haired fellows of various build and condition sporting coats and hats with "Korean War Veteran" patches attached, leaning against store fronts, staying out of the wind. One older fellow with a leather jacket and pilot's cap emblazoned with F-51 Mustang Fighter symbols and a row of ribbons and other "glitter" pinned on. There were many warriors and their families in attendance, milling, shaking hands, smiling, being proud ... Just another Saturday morning in a small Midwest town.

There were a couple of fellows closer to my age with Special Forces Berets sporting ponytails, beards, sunglasses and Biker colors. There was a color guard made up of an admixture of Veterans from all the wars, and all the service branches that we could muster.

I began to feel a little strange. I haven't been to a Veteran's Day Celebration in years. I just have usually tried to avoid connecting with that part of my history. No, I am not ashamed of it. It's there. It's a part of me. I have simply tried to move on. The Viet Nam Warriors came home to an indifferent and often disdainful society. A society that could not understand, nor seemed to care for what we had gone through, slugging through mud, rice paddies, bugs and snakes that most of us will never forget, and the ever present fear that goes with fighting in guerilla fighting style ... ambush, hit and run, not even seeing who you killed or who got you. A gut wrenching, insidious type of fighting that wears men out and leaves deep, deep scars that never seem to heal for many of us.

I simply tried to move on with my life and not become too embroiled in the fact that I had served my country by giving twelve years of my life to it. I keep telling myself that it was only a small segment of what I am and what I have been. In the greater scheme of things, a relatively small portion of my life, barely 20%.

The ceremony began with a local chaplain praying into a microphone that picked up more low moaning from the cold wind than the prayer. The local high school band played the Star Spangled Banner, slightly out of tune, and not quite as sharply as the Marine Corp Band. However, as I stood there listening, and the flag began to be raised up the flagpole, there was metamorphosis. The sound of the band became fuller, deeper, precise. I found myself snapping to and presenting a hand salute. I felt a lump in my throat, and tears in my eyes, that I guess, could have just as easily been due to the piercing cold wind. But, I knew better. I thought, Hey! I'm not military anymore. I'm not supposed to render a hand salute. Yet as the flag slowly made its way up the pole, I didn't lower my hand.

People around me came into my field of vision, I couldn't help but notice with deep pride, that virtually every man, and some women had reacted the same way. A small sea of ancient, old, and not so old warriors, male and female alike, all were rendering the highest honor to our flag, and our country that we could for the moment, the simple, yet time honored, hand salute. Even the ancient in the wheel chair, while stooped from years of wear and tear, and God alone knows what travails, was standing and rendering, being held up by his wife, and several folks nearby.

I do not, in my life, ever remember being so proud as I was this morning. I realized that I am an insignificant part of something that is larger than many people can understand. I'm a member of one of the strongest unions created on God's Good Earth. I am an American Veteran. It doesn't matter whether my origin is American, Russian, Canadian, German, or ... Whatever from wherever.

The spiritual and psychic bond of being a warrior and a surviving American Veteran is something that no one can ever take away. It is a fraternity, maternity, and sorority, a collection of some of the finest human beings to exist, regardless of their station in life ... People who found something greater than themselves to believe in, strive for, and too often enough, die for ... An ideal that can not be put into simple words, a feeling that can not be described.

The rest of the service was pretty much a blur. I sadly thought of my late Father-in-law. I cried like a baby when they played Taps, that most haunting, forlorn, yet proud song that means so much to us Veterans.

After the closing prayer and VFW dismissal, I found myself walking around, shaking hands, smiling between tears, just like all the others, hugging fellow warriors, saying things like a simple "thanks", and the occasional "Welcome Home", and "damned glad to meet you".

I think I stood an inch taller, my back straighter, my chest puffed out ... Proud to have been a part of this small memorial service, proud to have served, and proud to be an elite American Veteran, with the realization that I'd do it all again, in a heartbeat.

"God Bless the USA" never had as much meaning for me as it does now. And I would "Gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today"

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