

Beyond the Uniform

From the bottom of my heart, I say to all of you:
"Thank you for your Service."



The events that brought me here today surprise me still. A couple years ago I became friends with Mike and Mary Aloï. As time passed I began sharing poems I had written, and even wrote poems for them.

One day a few months ago Mike asked me to write a poem for him and call it "**An Angry Man**." He didn't tell me what to make it about. In fact, he probably said, "Surprise me."

So I did a lot of thinking about who might be angry and why. I recalled stories about 1) The postal worker who got fired and bears a grudge, 2) The man whose wife took their children and left him, and 3) The man who is homeless and blames everyone else

And then I remembered Vietnam. I was a Vietnam wife, and I remember that Vietnam soldiers were not given the honor or gratitude they deserved when they came home. Instead, many faced hostility, indifference, or silence. It was only much later that the American public began to truly separate that war from the warriors.

Though inspired by Vietnam, this poem is universal in its application.

"AN ANGRY MAN"

I am an angry man.
Cold, hungry, shabby.
Others sharing the sidewalk
look right through me
like I'm invisible.
But I'm not.

The faded Delta Force
patch on my jacket
means nothing to them.
All they see is another
down and out loser,
begging for a dollar.

Not one of them sees
who I really am,
what I have done, or
how important I've been
to the life they enjoy.

I was there when
Bin Laden was found,
Noriega was captured,
and throughout the
Global War on Terror.

If they knew, I'm not sure
it would make a difference,
because right now, right here,
they see a dirty shabby bum
begging for a dollar.

Yes, I am an angry man,
ignored,
dismissed, and
worst of all,
unknown.

I make it a point to visit the Vietnam Wall whenever I am in Washington, D.C. I am in awe of its majestic beauty.

There are two influences for this poem.

One day in the mid 1960's a very young woman was gently escorted into my office. Her paperwork contained the words "Blue Bark," and her escort gave the necessary information for me to complete the paperwork for her personal property to be shipped to her parents' home. I've never forgotten her face which looked like it was carved from stone. She was a brand new widow of a young soldier killed in Vietnam.

My cousin, **1/Lt Wendell Theo Eliason**, was killed in Vietnam in 1965. He was a helicopter pilot and is immortalized on Panel 1E, Line 98, of the unforgettable black granite face of the Vietnam Wall. The poem is fictitious, but he is real.

Together, these two events inspired this Poem.

"THE WALL, PANEL 1E, LINE 98"

Glistening in the morning sun,
the "V" draws me down.
There are way too many white letters
on the shiny black granite.

Finally I reach it, Panel 1E.

I touch names, one by one,
moving down the lines
until I see his white letters
inscribed on Line 98.

My fingers trace the roughness,
then I lay my face against the name
as once I laid it on his face
while lying in his arms.

I weep as others wept standing in the "V",
memories are almost tangible
as they fill the air around me at
Panel 1E, Line 98.



Around the year 2000 my sister and I interviewed our 85-year-old father about his life. In one interview he told about the years 1944-1945 when he was in the Navy. He served aboard the USS Abercrombie, a Destroyer Escort, in the months leading up to the end of the war. I've been reading the book, "Little Ship, Big War: The Saga of DE343" by Edward P. Stafford (First Lieutenant on the ship) which is the story of that ship in the Pacific. To think my Dad was on her during the incidents related in the book is terrible. But I think a more poignant incident is that last goodbye before going off to war.

"WALK AWAY"

They stood in the twilight
looking at each other,
holding back the tears that
threatened to spill over.

She hesitantly asked,
"You want me to go or...?"
He said, "Yeah, that's better,
you just walk away."

So she turned and walked away
with their two little girls
while he stood there, watching,
until they were out of sight.

No one knows the anguish of that scene
better than you—and me,
as I stood in an airport and watched
my new husband walk away into war,
just as my Dad watched my Mom
walk away with my sister and me
so many years ago
when he went to war.

After those poems, I thought that maybe a little change of pace would be in order. So here's an incident from my days in the Claims Office working for a JAG officer on Sharpe Army Depot.

"FUBAR"

We stood unsteadily on the
uneven bed of a red pickup that was
covered in gaudy crepe paper.
We were trying to convey the impression
that we believed
in what we were doing.

But it was hopeless.
Only one of us believed, and
it was not me!

Our fearless leader, a serious unsmiling
JAG Officer,
had issued an edict to us, his staff.
It was that we were to create a float
for the 4th of July parade.

"Oh no!" I'd thought, so
I politely smiled and said, "No thank you."
What do you think happened next?
Yeah, we built a float.

It was FUBAR from then on.

The float was a sad looking affair,
and us? Even worse.
July is hot, particularly on an Army Depot with
no trees, no shade, no breeze,
just a big round ball of yellow heat above.

Picture three people,
dressed in hot clothes and wigs,
holding signs that read:
"The Pen is Mightier than the Sword." And
"A Government of Laws and not Men."

We looked pitiful, sweating like pigs and
squinting our eyes
against the hot bright sun.

It was a good thing none of us
fell off our poor little float
as it made its way along the
road.

Remember, FUBAR was in play.

When the parade was finally over,
we looked and felt like refugees
from the fiery furnace.
And to this day, parades are on my...well,
you know what list they're on.

"1933"

This poem speaks
from a different
point of view, and a
different time and
place. Its message is
important, however,
because it reminds
us why we must never
forget the costs of war—not just to soldiers like you, but to those innocents, particularly the children, who are hurt and don't understand why.

I went to school one day
like I'd done the day before,
but something was different.

Other kids looked at me strangely,
and wouldn't sit with me at lunch.

I wondered why and finally,
I asked the boy who was my friend,
but who today,
wouldn't sit with me either.

"What's the matter with everyone?"
He squinted his eyes and said,

"You're a Jew."



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The next poem is based on a real event immortalized in print, and in a movie called “TAKING CHANCE.” I happened to see the movie earlier this year, and watching it I was moved to tears. I also was curious to know more, so I did some research and read Lt. Col. Mike Strobal’s personal account. Following all of that, I could not resist the urge to write a poem about it. Here is “MY CHANCE OF A LIFETIME” written from Lt. Col Strobal’s point of view as a military escort.

I thought he was from my hometown,
so I volunteered.

It turned out he wasn’t, but—
I did it anyway, and to this day
nothing else I’ve ever done
seems as important.

As his military escort, I was scheduled to
claim him at Dover Air Force Base
after he arrived from Afghanistan.
When the time came to join him on
his final journey home, I sat up front
with his container in the back of the car.

Everyone who saw us that day, as we
drove off the base, either saluted
or removed their hat in respect.
Upon arriving at the cargo terminal at the
Philadelphia airport, it happened again.
Salutes, hats removed, and tear-filled eyes.

All along the way, people were moved
by the sight of this fallen soldier
on his last journey home. There were—
Flight Attendants, Pilots, Loaders, Inspectors,
Maintenance Men, Construction Workers,
Northwest Airlines Employees, Drivers, and more.

People somehow knew I was his military escort,
and as such, I was rendered a respect
that I knew was not for me, but for him.

When his casket was opened at the
funeral home in Riverton, Wyoming, I stepped
forward to inspect his uniform.
It was immaculate, every crease perfect, every ribbon
in place, a testament to the meticulous care
by the Marines at Dover AFB Mortuary.

I followed his funeral van on the drive up to
Dubois, his hometown, where hundreds of
friends and family waited for him.
Have you ever followed a vehicle carrying
a fallen soldier home?
I hadn’t, so it was an eye-opener for me.

The flag-draped coffin was visible through the
van’s windows, and when drivers saw it, they
slowed and joined the convoy.

Imagine if you will,
a hearse with a flag-draped coffin
leading a caravan of cars and trucks,
all following with their lights on in respect.

In Dubois, he was carried into the high school gym,
where his service would be held.
The floor was covered with chairs—

I told his family how I’d observed respect, dignity,
and honor, and how
everyone along the journey
expressed grief and sympathy over their loss.

They and his friends introduced me to my charge,
Lance Corporal Chance Phelps,
by their many stories and warm memories.
The service was everything it should have been,
a fitting tribute to this young soldier,
filled with respect for his service, and his sacrifice.

I escorted him all the way to the hilltop grave
where he was finally laid to rest.
My final solitary salute embodied my respect—

Respect. It had been a beautiful thing that
cast a spotlight on a young man who
offered up his life when he joined the Marines.

As for me, I hadn’t known Chance in life.
Now, I not only feel like I knew him,
I miss him.

*Brought to you
by Beverly Read,
author of Beyond
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