

To Humanize a Soldier

If you had asked me how many Americans died in Vietnam, I could have told you around 58,000 soldiers. If you had asked me who had quoted Vietnam as the “Unwinnable War”, I could have told you Walter Cronkite. Yet, had you asked me what the color of deceased soldier David R. Beattie’s child’s eyes were, I would have said, “I don’t know”.

It never crosses your mind that a soldier is as human as you and me. We assume they are killers who must become callous to their surroundings. Maybe, these were the thoughts of the American people as they labeled their soldiers “Baby Killers” and “Murderers” and spat in their faces. Maybe, they didn’t know they were fathers, or sons, or brothers. Maybe, they forgot they were human. Maybe, they thought they were just soldiers.

Staring at a painting of a dying soldier, I was greeted by the first of two veterans who would teach me the most meaningful and personal history lesson of my life, Jim Biringer. I shook his hand and thanked him for allowing me and my mother to join him on the tour he was guiding with his friend and fellow veteran. We talked briefly about the emotion in the painting I was looking at, when he pointed me towards the *letters*. These were actual letters written to and from veterans and their loved ones during the war. I began to read the first letter, when the sergeant directed me to read the captions on the bottom of each one. What ensued I was not prepared for.

I’ve always been a person to stand for the flag and recite the pledge of allegiance out of respect for our troops, yet all my life, a soldier was a statistic in a history book. They had no names, no families, no emotions, but here, in barely legible writing, everything I knew was wrong. They don’t teach you in a classroom that a soldier can be afraid to die. I never read in a book that a soldier might dream of returning home to eat his mom’s food. I never had a teacher tell me that a soldier named David Beattie would be expecting a daughter with big, hazel eyes. What my teachers did teach me, was the meaning of the acronym KIA, which was inscribed in the captions of almost every letter I

read. I always knew soldiers died in war, but these were not just soldiers anymore, they were now people. They had names and aspirations, ambitions and fears, and people praying and waiting hopelessly for them back home. Running my fingers mindlessly over the glass, a hand was placed on my shoulder by the second man who would impact my life that day. His name was Jim McGinnis. Shaking me from my thoughts, he greeted me with a warm smile and hearty laugh that I would come to appreciate throughout my visit.

He introduced me to the “challenge coin” that he believes kept him and his squad safe during the war. He shared stories of war that previously I had learned emotionlessly in a classroom. He opened his binder to show letters and pictures from Vietnamese children he had befriended. I learned of the atrocities, which took place in My Lai and the innocent people that had fallen victim to total warfare. But, here I was reading letters in broken English from a Vietnamese child saying she missed Mr. McGinnis. This veteran, who had faced widespread discrimination for things he did in Vietnam, was receiving letters of friendship from the very people he was supposedly killing.

After a few hours of perusing the museum after the small group had left, Mr. McGinnis and Mr. Biringer offered me and my mom a guided tour of the memorial, even though their day was finished. They took us through the memorial where their words brought the meaning of the war to life. Lamposts used to represent the formation of soldiers, spaced ten meters apart, walking through high grass, could now be visualized. Statues, which I thought were to represent only the tragedies of war, turned into symbols of diversity and how everyone helped each other in combat. The dead tree which appeared to have only aesthetic value, was truly symbolic of the effects of Agent Orange used in the war, which not only wreaked havoc during the war, but after the war, as countless soldiers suffered the effects of cancer and other diseases. Everything in the memorial had a meaning. There was no tribute without a purpose, similar to how every soldier had a story. They don't teach you in a classroom that soldiers are people. The hours I spent at the memorial provided me with more knowledge and insight into the Vietnam War and world around me, than I had learned in four years of high school.

Sadly, preparing to leave, we said our final goodbyes to Mr. McGinnis and Mr. Biringer. These men had changed my understanding of the men and women of the Armed Forces. Turning back, one last time, I asked if there was any way I could repay them for their time, at which Mr. McGinnis replied, “just thank the soldiers”, “too many of us didn’t get the respect and appreciation you gave us today”. “Just go up to a soldier and shake his hand, because he’ll feel good, but you’ll feel better”, and then shook my hand.

It’s hard to believe, but something changed in me. All my life, I have exchanged handshakes, but this handshake was different. I had the opportunity to meet people who showed me a different and new perspective on war and what it was like to be in one. In that final handshake, I not only experienced the humanization of a soldier, but also became a little more humane myself.

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