



Returning Heroes

Written by Colonel Joel Ward, Ret. about 11 November 2004.

I experienced something when I was at DFW Airport the other day that reverberated deep within my consciousness. I was there to take my granddaughter to fly to Pittsburgh. She was 12 and flying alone. I was allowed to escort her beyond the security checkpoint to the gate. We hugged, kissed and she boarded her flight.

As instructed, I waited in the departure lounge until the flight left the ground. The intercom announced that there was a special flight arriving from Iraq with soldiers returning home for rest and recuperation. I went to the window looking out at the tarmac. Everyone in the lounge joined me. Sure enough there was a jet marked "North American" along its fuselage. It was stopped away from the gate. Then I noticed fire trucks parked about fifty feet away from the left and right of the aircraft. The intercom announced that the firefighting equipment was performing a "welcome home" for the returning heroes. The trucks began

their water streams above, but in front of, the arriving aircraft. On queue, the aircraft began to roll to the gate passing under the two arches of water. I have not seen this recognition mentioned in the news or advertised. They just do it. How wonderful it is — a sincere, heart felt expression of thanks.

From a distance I watched the soldiers deplane, many meeting their loved ones. With a lump in my throat, I tried to congratulate a few of them, but they were busy reconnecting with family. I left the airport feeling very good for our returning heroes.

Driving home, I thought about the experience. It occurred to me how our country has evolved. I truly believe that our society has become more sophisticated and discerning in its judgment of world situations. I am sure that some of the people welcoming the soldiers did not agree with the war in Iraq and yet they welcomed the soldiers as returning heroes. They made the distinction between national agendas and the role of the soldier.

This is drastically different from my experience when I arrived at San Francisco International Airport in 1966 from Vietnam. In the required uniform, I departed my flight and entered the terminal. Bleary from seventeen hours of flight and twelve months of combat, all I wanted to do was connect to a flight to Peoria to join my wife and son. I wasn't paying much attention to the crowd in the airport until a long haired, bearded young man approached me and said I should be ashamed of what I was doing and then spat on me. It made me realize that I have a deep seated emotion about how America in general treated Vietnam returnees. I am told that many other Vietnam vets feel the same. They were neither greeted nor shown appreciation for their sacrifices until over twenty years later when the Vietnam Memorial was established on the Mall in Washington, DC.

Most Americans are now more aware that there is a difference between implementing a national strategy and enforcing that strategy with soldiers who go into harms way. Today, they know that these soldiers have patriotically volunteered to protect America and are merely following legal orders given them.

What is different now? In both wars our leadership perceived that we needed to combat a threat quickly. Arguably, delaying the military option could allow the situation to worsen while pursuing diplomatic solutions (many of which had already failed). Ultimately this could cost the United States more in people and money. It appears that today's leaders believe that they must be decisive and don't believe they have the luxury of time to determine the national will. No matter which side you take, this is a very tough call.

Americans are much better informed today. Some of the credit should be given to our government for allowing correspondents to be imbedded. Also, much of this increased understanding should be given to the media. Collectively, they have personalized the story

of the citizen turned combat hero. When I was in Vietnam as an advisor to Republic of Vietnam (RVN) forces, I never saw a reporter. The news coverage I saw between Vietnam tours was mainly of U.S. military units fighting in the highlands up north. Even that coverage was by reporters who usually stood in front of various military headquarters and not on the battlefield. Technology of the times delayed video coverage by about two days. Although we could argue that that news coverage might be biased, improving technology, an aggressive media, and military willingness to let it all be covered has kept America better informed about Iraq.

To those Vietnam veterans who feel that they should have been welcomed like this new generation is being welcomed from Iraq, I say, you're right, but let's move on. At least these heroes are being welcomed with pride. That's progress! I am convinced we are a much better country today than we were.

So, THANK YOU, DFW Airport.

And to today's combat veterans a most heart felt THANK YOU.

And THANK YOU, ALL AMERICANS who understand and distinguish between our national agenda and the commitment, dedication and bravery of the American soldier. We should all be extremely proud of this generation and its commitment to duty, honor, country.

Thank you,

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