

Honor the Warriors

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I was sitting at Gate 5 in Baltimore's airport, waiting for my flight when a well-dressed man took up the gate agent's microphone and began to speak, his voice cutting above the white noise of waiting passengers' conversations. He tapped the mic and began, "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am here representing a group..." mentioning a name that I didn't quite catch but later found out was Honor Flight. He waited as a slow but palpable hushing went through the small crowd. Then he continued, "In just a very few minutes," he said, "a group of WWII veterans is going to come off that plane that just pulled in." He pointed toward the silver bird that was visible through the floor to ceiling window. "They are here to visit the WWII Memorial in Washington. I hope you will all join in greeting them when they come through the door."

"Well, isn't that nice," remarked a woman sitting across from me.

"The right thing to do," responded the man next to her, nodding solemnly.

My mind flashed back to the men of the 49th Troop Carrier Squadron, my father's group, and of the yearly reunion they held. I had attended nearly every one of them and saw firsthand how each year the number of attendees got smaller and smaller until there were only two left strong enough to make the last trip. But before then, when a dozen or so were healthy enough, they came with their wives and children to a special reunion that had been planned for them in Washington. At the Pentagon, these aging fliers were

treated like the heroes they were and with the respect they had earned. That solemnity didn't stop them from taking pictures of each other standing at the Secretary of Defense's podium and doing it more with humor and fellowship than with awe, for they were, in those moments, once again the brash, immortal fliers they had been in their warrior youth.

It was not until they went to the WWII Memorial that they became more somber, more reflective. Here before them, amid the grandeur of pillars and fountains, were their lives depicted in *bas relief* in murals on two massive walls. Here was the time in their lives when they had forged friendships and lost friends, when they were young enough to feel immortal and old enough to feel scared. Here were their battles, depicted in this time that, for many of them, was the time that was the time of their lives. An aura of history clung to them. For a moment or more, their aging bodies moved with a once-youthful, athletic grace. Their faces, silvered mirrors of war-spent youths, reflected in their mien that they were once again flying through bursts of AAA, nearly blinded by smoke and streaking lights, smelling the acrid oil of a burning engine, feeling the buck of the damaged warbird they flew. They were invincible then, and their presence now was proof.

Here, today, were twenty five more men who were about to have that same jolt of recalling those days, days that forged their character and the reputation of a nation

The crowd waited. The first passengers began to emerge from the jetway. Waiting hands came together and then dropped; these were not the expected men. More passengers deplaned. Not the men either. The extended wait made a man standing near me shake his head and comment, "By the time they finally do arrive, it's gonna be

anticlimactic," but then he rethought his glib words and quickly added, "No, this is too honorable a moment to be anything but the right moment when they do come." And just as his words ended and he sighed the first of the veterans were wheeled off the plane. What had started out as an audience of perhaps a score of waiting passengers had by now swelled to over a hundred, and twice that many hands came together and voices lifted in a rousing hail of applause and thank you's. The men looked up, bewildered.

"Huh? What's happening? Is this for me?" each quizzical face seemed to ask. And then as realization struck, they ducked their heads as if embarrassed by the attention, but only for a moment. Then they looked out at their audience and grinned.

In ones and twos and threes they followed in small, separate clusters off the plane: some in wheelchairs; some on crutches or with a cane; some walking unsteadily, leaning on the arm of a relative or airline agent. But the last of them almost strode into view almost as if they were on parade, their steps jaunty, shoulders back, heads high, once again the dashing young aviators and sailors and soldiers they still saw in their own mind's eye. They turned their faces toward the throng, doffed their ball caps and surged forward with renewed vigor.

Not a few of the men were accompanied by their children, some by a grandchild. It was they, that third generation, who were the most struck by this public recognition of their grandfathers. I'm not sure they understood it. I hope it gave them pause and a curiosity to ask, "What was that all about, Grandpa?" And I hope their grandfathers told them what it was all about, the guts and the glory.

No war is a good war, no matter how the pundits spin it and the historians recount it. People die; lives are shattered, corrupted, changed. But the men and women who fight

those wars deserve all the praise their countrymen can heap upon them for the acts they attempted, the deeds they accomplished, and the burden they shoulder for the cause they carried.

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