

What It Means To Be a Veteran; Reflections On The 20th Anniversary of 911.

I should have known.

I am the son of a Vietnam Era Veteran.

I should have known.

We spent two years on a naval base in California during the height of the Vietnam War.

My parents best friend was shot down over Vietnam. Every night we kneeled by our beds and prayed, "Help Uncle Art to come home safely."

They found his remains and he was buried at sea. My mother flew out to the aircraft carrier to escort Art's widow.

I should have known.

I grew up in a country striving to be a more perfect union. A bastion of freedom.

I should have known what it means to be a Veteran.

Then I watched two towers crumble while ordinary people faced a choice of jumping to their deaths or dying in the fire and rubble.

And the ordinary people who charged a cockpit knowing this was their last desperate act for survival.

What does it mean to be a Veteran?

To voluntarily forfeit your independence and put your life in the hands of total strangers.

To subject yourself to all manners of scrutiny, examination, and harsh conditions.

To immediately make lifelong friends with people from all across the human spectrum, and not care about their color, creed, or caste.

To work as a team toward one goal; complete the mission.

To learn how to be lethal in the service of the mission and your comrades.

To write letters of love and apology to a spouse and children, to be opened and read in the event of death.

To prepare oneself physically, emotionally, and spiritually for death, including suicide in the event of potential capture.

To be in a hospital in Germany and sit by the bedside of a soldier who just had his leg amputated, and call his mother in Iowa waking her up to tell her he is alive.

To crouch in a bunker while bombs burst around you and realize for the first time this is what it means to be an American.

To watch hundreds of American soldiers in formation at the Al Faw Palace in Baghdad as they took the oath as new US citizens.

To fish in a canal in a boat at night with an Iraqi doctor who stated there was no PTSD in Iraq because all Iraqis have been traumatized.

To play hockey with Slovakian soldiers on a cement slab in Kandahar while the temperature hovered around 110 degrees.

To buy a chess board for my son in a bazaar, while listening to the Afghan merchant describe his dream of a safer world for his children.

To watch flag-draped caskets loaded onto a cargo plane on Memorial Day, knowing there are grieving families waiting in Dover.

To come home but never to come home.

To feel happiness but always colored with guilt for surviving.

To be ordinary and live each day with memories of the extraordinary.

To become emotional every time you hear the National Anthem and gaze on a fluttering American flag.

To do penance by sitting with Veterans at the VA listening to their stories of resilience and recovery.

To listen to Veterans describe how much they miss the military and want to return, and agree.

To listen to Veterans acknowledge it is easier some days to die than to live, and agree.

To hear of the death of a Veteran through suicide or drug overdose, and grieve like you lost a family member.

To walk through a Veteran's cemetery knowing each stone holds a sacred story of service, sacrifice, and purpose.

I couldn't have known what it was like to be a Veteran,

until I became a Veteran.

