

Random Rambling Thoughts of an Old Veteran on Veterans Day

Let me be clear, combat veterans are no more important than any other veteran. I speak as a combat veteran because that was my job. We were all on the same team.

I am only speaking for myself. I think most combat veterans will see themselves in some of my thoughts but not all of us think alike or have had the same experiences. Others can speak for themselves, they've earned the right.

I have been asked but I almost never speak with civilians about combat. I don't mind talking about the aftermath, I think it is therapeutic and I think it breaks down barriers between veterans and their non-veteran friends and family. There will never be a shortage of combat veterans and there will always be a need for mutual understanding.

I want to emphasize this right away; I am not special or exceptional in any way but I am different. It has taken me many years to come to grips with this difference.

The aftermath of combat is lifelong. It becomes part of who you are and you can't walk away or hide from it. You have to work hard to keep it from defining and controlling your life.

It has been 45 years since I was in Vietnam and I still think about it daily. I suspect my memory is selective but it is the only one I have. A person's mind is complicated.

I have learned fear, heroism and death have a face and I have seen them.

I now know every man has the ability to be good or evil, compassionate or ruthless, terrified or steadfast and there comes a time in every war when each is appropriate. You do not choose those times, they just happen. You can question yourself until the cows come home but what is done is done.

I am alive today because I was taught how to react without thinking. After all of these years I still do that on occasion even though it is no longer necessary. This is sometimes a problem for me and those around me.

I am not politically correct and I refuse to play that game. Too many Americans have died to preserve our Constitutional right to say, think and believe what we want. I respect the right of people to have political and social agendas but I will not be forced to agree, sympathize or comply with them. My Mother taught me how to act years ago and her teachings included common sense and respect for others. Her words are just as true today as back then. Don't expect me to take you seriously if you dye your hair neon orange and parade down Main Street "nekkid" to promote a cause, but I will recognize your right to make a fool of yourself.

I truly believe political correctness is the biggest threat to our freedom and will eventually permeate our military and render it impotent if left unchecked. That would be the ultimate irony and a tragedy of epic proportions. Wars are not won by handcuffed people adhering to the whims of finger-in-the-air politicians, clever wordsmiths or holier-than-thou "gotcha" artists.

Ridiculous rules of engagement, sensitivity training and good sportsmanship will get you killed on the battlefield. The politically correct should stick to rewriting history, changing the names of team mascots, creating new "ism's", lobbying for unisex bathrooms and finding dignified monikers for the lazy and stupid. Leave the work of defending this country to people with a little common sense.

There are no neat and tidy wars and "limited" wars are like being a "little bit pregnant". If we do not have the political will to spit in "Ugly's" face and kick his ass, don't go to war with Ugly. "Limited" and "war" should never be used in the same sentence. It doesn't even make sense. The lives of our young defenders of freedom are more valuable than the results of the next election. Let them fight or leave them at home. If you just want a show tune in to Friday Night Smackdown and watch professional wrestling. Just my personal opinion.

The first thing a man wants when he thinks he is about to be killed is his Mother. It does not matter how old or composed he is. If he's not calling her name aloud he is thinking of it. On occasion I have difficulty being the gentleman my Mother taught me to be. It is not her fault, she taught me well and God bless her for that. Thanks Mom, I miss you.

We should not be teaching our children that everyone is a "winner" and everyone gets a trophy for participating. Visit a battlefield just once and you will only see "losers" and "survivors". There are no winners and no one cares about trophies. The world is real and there are plenty of bad guys who have no concept of fair play and you can bet your sweet ass they are not politically correct (see what I did there?). I do not advocate scaring children and they have every right to a happy childhood but I do believe they should be anchored by core values and prepared to face reality. The world is not all candy, Air Jordans and i-phones. (Just to keep things honest I can eat a whole bag of mini Butterfingers in about 15 minutes and not gain weight. So I got that going for me.)

I am sometimes alone even among friends. This used to bother me until I realized I don't mind being alone. I need a lot of time to myself.

I know "survival" trumps any limits or boundaries civilized men have set for themselves. There is no civility on the battlefield.

I have dreams I can't remember after I waken and I'm thankful for that.

I don't think like you or the way I once did. Bear with me and we will come together in time. If we can't, you go your way and I will go mine. No hard feelings.

My mind often wanders to another place and time. If I seem to ignore you or make light of something important you have to say, don't hold it against me. It's not personal and I don't even realize I'm doing it.

If the only seat available does not allow a view of the door, I will stand.

You look at a picture and see a winding path with beautiful flowers, overhanging trees and the serenity of nearby running water. I look at the same picture and see an "ambush". I see some

things in my own way and that is sometimes awkward for both of us. I could give many examples but you get the picture.

Please do not "sneak up" on or startle me. I never know what I am going to do but I will always respond in some way.

When I was in the Army it took me a month to grow a mustache. Now I can grow one on my ear before noon.

You watch and listen to the sound of fireworks on the Fourth of July and it stirs the patriotism inside you. It does the same for me but I flinch with every bang and do my best to hide it.

I still get chill bumps each time I hear "The Star Spangled Banner". I never fail to remove my hat and if there is someone nearby that doesn't I will remind them. The "Star Spangled Banner" means a lot to me.

I harbor no desire and have no intention of hurting anyone but a firearm and big dogs give me peace of mind. Peace of mind is a valuable asset to a combat veteran and you cling to anything that gives it to you. I really do try to get along with others and I respect your opinion whether I agree or disagree with you. This is one area where I make an exception. I don't care what anyone thinks about my firearms so save your breath. A smart person would keep a fence between themselves and my dogs.

I don't like parades, noisy crowds or funerals. I avoid them if at all possible.

I had some bad days in Vietnam and I've had some bad days since. I expect I will have some bad days in the future but I have never had a day, an hour or even a moment where my love for this country waivered. At no time have I felt this country owed me anything. No amount of military service can repay the debt I owe this country and nothing I have done or will ever do could possibly repay those who gave all. That's not just talk, it's a fact.

Statistics say I will not live as long as you. I have lived on borrowed time for many years but I have lived life to its fullest. I am way ahead of the game and have no complaints. I have been blessed.

The sound of a helicopter always stirs my emotions and brings back memories. I try to avoid them.

I am tense most all the time but I seldom realize it. If my fists are clinched as we speak to each other don't worry, I am not going to hit you.

I have a small extended family of "brothers". My love, loyalty and respect for them and theirs for me is a very important part of my life. We have peeked into each other's soul and that kind of brotherhood is special and everlasting. I love them all and would die for them. Do not ever doubt that.

Sleeping pills are a gift from God.

Many of my "brothers" have had serious health issues for years. For some each day is a struggle. I am not talking about statistics; I am talking about men I personally know. It breaks my heart but their courage inspires me.

I always walk fast. If I am with a group I always end up way out front. I never realize I am doing this and I have no answer as to why. It is not physical because I am admittedly lazy.

Agent Orange is the gift that keeps on giving. Just say "no" if Uncle Sam wants to introduce you to it.

Every now and then I run into a "brother" I haven't seen in decades. I still know them and they still know me better than people I have been around all my life. Funny how that works.

Never feel sorry for me, that is the last thing I need or want. I am a proud veteran who would do it all again in a heartbeat. My life has been different but the vast majority of it has been a joy. I don't think a man can ask for more than that.

I don't eat anything with "strips", "bites" or "nuggets" in its name no matter how much "special sauce" or ketchup it has on it. Just thought I'd throw that in for the hell of it.

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(This piece was written by Loyd Cates)