

Editorial: The last vet standing

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Three different times in one weekend, I attended events where veterans were asked to stand. With scores of people in the room each time, I could count on one hand the number of veterans who stood each time. I remember a time when most of the men and some of the women in the room stood.

I might not have paid too much attention to the small number of vets standing if I hadn't witnessed it three times in rapid succession. I've noticed this trend over the years, fewer and fewer vets standing for recognition on Veteran's Day. I would consider this a good thing except for the world in which we live.

When many vets stood together

I didn't serve in the military, but most of the men in my family did.

Both of my grandfathers served during World War II. My mom's dad served in North Africa and Italy; my dad's dad served in the Pacific and again in Korea. My mom's dad lost most of the hearing in one of his ears in an explosion. My dad's dad was on the first Lexington carrier--Lady Lex--when she was sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea.

My dad gave eight years to the Air Force, spending some of that time in Vietnam.

All three--my two grandfathers and my dad--were profoundly changed by their military service. How could they not be? I was profoundly changed by a few years in college, which doesn't hold a candle to even a few months at war.

I've heard a few stories from their time in the military ... but not many. Some things are very hard to talk about.

All three served at a time when, if you were a male of a certain age, you were going to serve in the military. If you didn't join voluntarily, you stood a good chance of being volunteered, or drafted. That's why when I was young, every room was full of veterans.

Growing up around vets

When I was young, military service touched all of us. If we didn't serve, our parents did. My children are growing up in a far different time.

My dad grew up in the shadow of World War II and during the Korean War. He grew up very close to the glory of the Allied victory in World War II and the stories and pictures of vets' celebrated homecoming.

Then there was Vietnam.

Oh, what am I doing? I'm talking about things I don't know. I'm talking about things I only know from the outside looking in. And from the outside looking in, it seems we as Americans know less and less about what it means to be a veteran.

Then there was Vietnam. Dad wasn't welcomed home the same way his dad was welcomed home. How things had changed.

The days when vets are invisible

At least three of my high school classmates joined the military after graduation, all three voluntarily. We didn't have the spectre of the draft. Nor did high school graduates in 2001, 2002 or 2003 when the U.S. commitment to war was so high.

I don't remember when my classmates came home. I don't remember when one returned from Bosnia or another returned from Iraq.

In eight years as the pastor of a small country church in a very small country town, I can remember less than a handful of seniors who joined the military after graduation. I don't know if any of them are or were in Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria. My ignorance is not a mark of pride.

With each passing year, it seems each generation becomes less and less connected to what it means to be a veteran. There are fewer and fewer of us who are one.

Until the last vet is standing

When just a handful of vets are standing, when those currently serving are out of sight of most of us, we may become less and less aware of what we owe to them. We may begin to take what we have more and more for granted. Really, there's no "may" about it.

I long for the day when no military veterans are standing because we all have beaten our swords into plowshares, because nations aren't lifting up the sword against nations, because we aren't learning war anymore. But that day isn't here, and it seems a long way off.

Because we don't live in a world without war, because we do live in a world characterized by greed, hatred, mistrust, ego, fear and evil, we still need the willing and able to fight. We still need those who can and will to stand up against injustice, oppression and murder wherever it may be found.

And until there is no more war or need for war, we will need to stand by those who fight, right up to the last vet standing.

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