



American Warrior Day of Honor Reflection of the Flight Home



{This is a composite of the experience of two World War II veterans returning from an American Honor Flight as told to their adult children who accompanied them as guardians. The quotes from letters they received are real as are the feelings expressed by these two "heroes". Though they rejected the term, there is no doubt that they are heroes to their families and the young students who wrote to them. It is recommended that it be read aloud to the student writers to help them understand how important their letters will be to these veterans.}

REFLECTION: THE FLIGHT HOME

I awaken from my slumber as overhead lights go on at each seat. We are not yet home but the plane is coming alive with chatter. It has been a very long, emotional day and my soldier comrades are as tired as I am. Still in a daze, my Leader hands me some envelopes announcing "Mail Call" as he moves down the aisle. This is unexpected and I think that perhaps a mistake has been made. I turn on my overhead light and I look at who the letters are addressed to; I see my name.

Around me other soldiers are reading their letters, sharing them with each other, and many have tears in their eyes. Now animated, a once exhausted planeload of soldiers is gaining energy as we head home.

I open the first letter. It is signed "Mary" from a school in my hometown. She does not know me but she said she is writing to me because I am a "hero". Me? This is surely a mistake. I am not a hero; I am a soldier and did what I had to do.

Then the memories flood in. Memories I held at bay for six decades. Memories of waiting - seemingly forever - then being thrown into battle in seconds, automatically doing what I was trained to do, the noise of armaments and shouts of people, the odors mixing together, tending to wounded, the weariness, grieving for lost comrades, and the fear that is always with you. I silently pray to see my loved ones again.

I turn back to the letters at hand trying to block these thoughts from so long ago. This one is from Mark who is in eighth grade. His words touching my heart, he states, "I am proud to be an American and to have this opportunity to tell you how much I appreciate your defending our democratic way of life."

Lucy in grade six writes: "We will never forget you and other veterans for all you have done for us. You all deserve to be honored every day."

Jimmy in grade five says: "Thank you for making me safe. My great-grandfather was a soldier and I wish he were still alive so I could thank him too."

A grade seven student named Juan wrote: "Someday I want to be a soldier. I know it is going to be hard but I want to be like my dad who is in the Army in Iraq and my grandfather who was in Vietnam. My grandfather told me that his father was a Marine in World War II and fought in the Pacific just like you did. I am as proud of you as I am of my family. Thank you." It is hard to imagine that my generation of soldiers still has influence on today's young people.

Back to Mary, who concludes her letter with: "Your family must be very proud to have a real hero in their lives."

Reading these letters touches me in a way that I cannot describe. Thanking me for service so many years ago. Feelings return that I have shut out for so long and have not even fully shared with members of my family. I came home to them when so many did not. I went back to school, got a job, married and raised a family who gave me grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I never forgot the war but I forced it into the background to move forward.

These letters are as precious to me as the letters I saved from my loved ones at home during the war. The power of these letters is not only the praises and appreciation they express but that they unlocked the reason why I became a soldier: to make our country safe for my family and every family in America. I am not a hero – I am a very lucky soldier who returned home.

{Prepared by Deborah and Andrew Carrano after conversations with their fathers whom they accompanied on a Day of Honor}.