

What Vets Remember

....and the trouble with telling civilians

By DAVID J. DANELO

May 9, 2006 -- THROUGHOUT the United States, over a million veterans of the "Long War" have spent the past few weeks marking intimate, personal anniversaries.

For some, celebration: Three years ago, we raced each other to Baghdad, vying for the prize of valor that, briefly, became a Marine corporal's as he covered Saddam's toppled statue with our flag (we cheered his political incorrectness).

For some, somber reflection: Two years ago, the Sunnis and Shiites united against us, just as briefly, in the nationwide uprising that became known as the First Battle of Fallujah.

And some remembered the most painful anniversary of all. Over a year ago, nothing special happened - unless you are Miriam Khoury of Simi Valley, Calif.; Robbin Ann Davis, of Lebanon, Ore.; or Kacey Carpenter in Odessa, Texas.

Writing the names of their fallen fiancé, husband, and son would be tragically trivial. Miriam, Robbin, and Kacey will never forget, but the rest of us wouldn't remember after reading the sentence.

We say they are not forgotten, but life's daily duties conceal the dark memories notched in whispers, e-mails or phone calls. Ordinarity masks the pain of knowing that so few have given so much for so little that is so misunderstood. (For Afghanistan vets, an entire *war* remains unknown.)

Sometimes, we deliberately forget our anniversaries in the haste to resume normalcy, to disassociate ourselves from the chaos by turning away from the TV. We forget by trying to bury the anger at the inequity of our sacrifices. We forget by concealing our secret guilt at reclaiming our portion of freedom while our surrogate kin still bleed and die. We assuage what we hide by checking the casualty rosters, sending care packages or calling up Walter Reed or Bethesda to see if the kid from our battalion or brigade made it home.

We forget because we feel forgotten. But we are forgotten because we don't demand to be remembered - yet we dare not demand this memory while the war is still being fought. That would be disloyal; a stain on their honor.

Instead, we just go about our lives. After all, we say, civilians wouldn't understand anyway.

We mouth platitudes. We say things we don't really believe, because we don't want to be quitters, whiners or weaklings. We've shown our strength, our commitment, our courage, our intellect and all of the other brilliant and noble qualities the politicians keep praising us for. We've learned to smile and nod every time we're effusively thanked. What else are we going to say? After all, we have to be polite.

Maybe we should stop being polite. Maybe we should say more of what we really feel, what we whisper to each other but don't ever say to the civilians: that there's something fundamentally unfair - perhaps even wrong - about telling a nation they're at war, but then only asking sacrifice of less than 1 percent of the population. It may be good business to restrict combat to volunteers, but it seems immoral to demand it indefinitely - even if the Iraqis do deserve it. Isn't there something the rest can do besides fly the flag and go shopping?

All the citizens are looking to us for answers, but we just want to go back to being citizens. We're supposed to justify and explain, but, in the end, we have no answers. We're just as confused as everybody else.

As the other anniversaries are commemorated, in our own quiet world we will remember the screams of wounded,

the errant mortar rounds, the piles of trash, the goats and sheep, the explosions that stripped our weapons from our hands before we even heard the sound. We remember stacks of care packages, runs to the PX and the picture, letter or note we carried as a talisman of normalcy. We remember sand and heat. The faces left behind.

It's not our job to defend the war, nor is it our moral obligation to oppose it. We didn't serve for political reasons, and our valor is no politician's property. But we cannot permit reality to be swept away amidst spin. If we do, the disassociation will continue until we are no better than the Party in the Orwell novel. Only Truth can combat such things.

Those who weren't there can never comprehend it all. Neither can we. But we can't expect them to meet us halfway unless we each, individually, explain the things we carried.

We can't change the past. But we can be trained from it. And one timeless lesson is this: If we, the veterans, bury our voices, than the bloodshed caused by their callowness is partially on our own hands.

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