

*There is a way that seemeth right unto a man,
but the end thereof are the ways of death.*
-- Proverbs 16:25

HONOR SALUTE

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AN OLD MAN DRESSED IN JUNGLE FATIGUES and a battered Marine field Jacket, stood peering through the heavy plate-glass window at Gate #3. He watched planes take off and land, marveling that a machine so big and heavy could fly.

His wrinkled face was covered with many days growth of scruffybeard mottled gray and black. He showed no emotion visible to the casual observer, but repeatedly wrung his hands for a few moments, then stuffed them into pockets of his jacket.

No one in the Waiting Area seemed to notice his presence. They were consumed with their own concerns wrangling children, talking on cell phones, munching junk food, or sleeping. No one noticed him but me.

The old man was so absorbed watching planes, he took no notice of the people and activity behind him. His manner, dress, and apparent attitude, put him out of place among the well dressed travelers. I watched him for more than an hour wondering if he was waiting for a relative, friend, or fellow veteran.

Every half-hour or so he would pace back and forth in front of the window, disappear into a rest-room and return flush-faced to his vigil. Two more hours passed, he watching and waiting and me wondering what he was there for. The old Marine finally sat in a chair next to the window, apparently exhausted.

People came and went, boarding and deplaning, yet he paid no attention to them or their activities. He seemed to be an odd-ball, a character out-of-place; he did not belong there so the people ignored him as if did not exist. All the while, he watched, waited, and perhaps hoped.

Ahhhhh! What do I care? Why is he here? Is he homeless, or retarded; is his mind gone locked in a

time loop from the past?

It is none of my business, still, I feel an odd burden of sadness for this grizzled old veteran. I, too, am a veteran and understand being different and ignored.

He suddenly became animated as an announcement blared over the PA system, "Young Tiger Flight number 1183, Special Military, now arriving Gate #3, from Kabul, Afghanistan."

So that's it! He is waiting for someone returning from that conflagration in Central Asia. I scanned the crowd looking for some kind of reaction to the announcement, but there was nothing; no response, nothing at all from the crowd. It was as if the war there and the old Marine did not exist at all.

The old man continued to fidget, wring his hands, shove them into his pockets, and pace the floor. He stretched his neck trying to see or locate something below. When he stopped and came to attention, I was certain he had found what he was waiting for. That did it! I had to feed my curiosity so I moved up behind and to his left. As I rose to stand the old Marine slowly raised his hand in salute. When I moved closer to the window, I saw why.

Below on the ramp a young Marine dressed in Class A Greens, was standing at attention waiting for a flag draped coffin to be lowered by conveyor to a waiting funeral cart. The young Marine slowly raised his right hand in salute as the coffin began to descend.

Just then, a boy of 8 or 9, approached the old Marine and gently tugged on the jacket to get his attention. The old man lowered his salute and turned to the boy smiling, "Yes, son?"

The boy politely asked, "What are you doing, sir?" The Marine replied, "I am waiting for my son." The boy said that he was waiting for his Daddy, and could they wait together.

The old man smiled and said it would be fine and returned to attention and the salute. The boy stood at attention and did his best to copy the salute. The Marine cocked an eye toward the boy and whispered, "Good boy." I followed, coming to attention, and rendered the Honor Salute.

As the coffin was deposited on the cart, the Escort Marine lowered his salute, followed by the Marine, the boy, and me. The old man turned to me and said, "Thank you. My son has come home."

A wave of sadness rolled over me as tears filled the old man's eyes. He reached out a hand and I took it, squeezing, the feeling that cannot be described, only felt.

I caught a glimpse of something hanging around his neck. It was a five-pointed medallion hanging from a strip of wide ribbon.

I thought to myself, "Where have I seen this before?" I struggled with this for a moment, then it hit me: This is the Medal Of Honor!

I shot a glance at the coffin below and saw the Escort Marine care-

fully laying out the same Medal at the head of the coffin.

“Oh no,” I said to myself. Father and son: one lived, the other killed. Both decorated with the Nation’s Highest Honor.

What cruel irony brought this to an aging father and Marine?

The old man turned to me and said, “Thank you; you must be a veteran.” “Yes, sir, I am,” my eyes brimming with tears. We stood there, hands clasped knowing what the other was feeling as only veterans can do.

The boy next to him sensed something was wrong and asked if he had done anything to upset the old man. The old Marine knelt before the boy and said, “You have done nothing wrong. That is my son down there in the coffin. The slow salute is called the HONOR SALUTE: we render HONOR SALUTE when our heroes return from war.”

At first, the boy appeared confused, then realized what was just told to him. He apologized, “I’m so sorry to bother you, sir. I didn’t know what was happening. I’m so sorry about your son.”

The boy began to cry covering his face in tearful embarrassment.

The old Marine embraced the boy and asked his name, “Brandon, my name is Brandon.”

“Well don’t cry Brandon, it’s alright. Thank you for joining me.”

“You honor me and my son. I am grateful for your company and I hope your Daddy comes home soon.”

Just at that moment, a young woman rushed up apologizing for the boy’s intrusion. The old Marine smiled and replied, “He’s fine; he was helping me.”

She looked up at the old man, suddenly recognizing him, “Oh, Hello Dad!”

“And He shall judge among the nations and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

-- Isaiah 2:4