

Opinion

My Turn: John M. Boehnert: Thoughts of soldiers in a hospital

By John M. Boehnert

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On Veterans Day we rightfully honor all those who have served our country in uniform. In doing so, we recognize both their service and their sacrifice.

Military service and sacrifice are inextricably intertwined, regardless of whether or not that service involved combat. Military service often requires separation from family, rigorous and demanding work, financial sacrifice, grueling hours, hazardous assignments, and all too often, little recognition.

On Veterans Day and Memorial Day, I often think of the sacrifices I saw during my two tours in Vietnam with the Army infantry. Of the many, one in particular stands out.

After being wounded on my first tour, I was sent from a hospital in Vietnam to Japan, common for those with serious injuries or those requiring extended recuperation. My hospital ward was filled with wounded Vietnam veterans, largely from the Army.

There were soldiers who had been shot, as I had, or wounded by shrapnel from grenades, rockets or mortars. There were amputees, and there were a few with unconventional injuries. One soldier had been on night ambush, lying flat on the ground on his stomach, when he felt himself being dragged away. He looked over his shoulder, saw his foot in the mouth of a tiger, and put a couple of M16 rounds into the tiger. The tiger ran off, leaving that soldier with a lasting injury.

The soldier in the bed next to me had been wounded in a mortar attack. His eyes had been fused shut by the explosion of the mortar. I was told they thought he was blind, but they didn't know at that point, for that was not the worst of his problems.

The lower half of his face was largely missing, shorn off by a mortar fragment. He was terribly disfigured.

As best I could tell, he had been good looking before his injuries.

I thought about him frequently over the years. We were about the same age, both serving in the Army in combat, both no doubt trying to do the best we could, and both looking forward to going home to our families; one of us came home relatively intact, and the other came home likely blind and with half a face.

Each time I think of him, I hope that things have turned out as well as they possibly could for him, given the circumstances.

And when I think of him, the image I see is what he would do when the orderlies would come to wheel his bed out of the ward to other parts of the hospital for treatment or tests. Each time, he would put his sheet over his face. He didn't know what he looked like, but he thought it was something that others should not have to see.

That soldier certainly sacrificed for his country, and thus, for all of us.

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