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What we owe our soldiers when they come home: A Memorial Day tribute

BY TOM MURPHY

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Recently I read a headline about the great number of soldiers returning from our wars with emotional scars. I met one of these soldiers. He was a seatmate of mine on a plane from Seattle to Los Angeles.

Buff with a crew cut and muscles rippling below a green camouflage T-shirt, he was the last to board our midday flight. I learned he was a former soldier when he told me in words jumbled from a meeting he'd had with Jim Beam before meeting me.

But liquor did a poor job covering whatever he was trying to mask. It wasn't so much his exaggerated gestures of friendship - including a powerful handshake and a breezy "Hey, friend" salutation - that gave him away. It was how quickly he switched from light to dark. When he told me I needed to catch him if he fell, that's when I knew his facile attempts at engagement were neither funny nor innocent. In these anxious times I could see the airline had a potential security risk on its hands as well.

That became clear when a flight attendant passed up the aisle preparing the cabin for departure. The soldier asked her where he knew her from, and she grinned. But when he then adopted a sinister tone, followed by a contemptuous head fake toward me, a cloud passed over her face. When he asked her if she thought I could be trusted in an emergency, that's when she raised a finger and promised to be right back.

A minute later a burly gate agent arrived and asked the soldier if he had been drinking. This was a telling moment - it could go either way, I sensed - but to my surprise the soldier's chest deflated and he said, "Yes, sir," in a whisper. The agent asked him if he had any carry-on items and he became limp as a puppy shown a rolled newspaper.

The agent offered to help carry his items off the plane, and the soldier complied with a series of barely audible, "Yes, sirs."

I bring all this up on Memorial Day because watching this young man brought back memories of reading Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," the story of a G.I. who returned home after the First World War with trauma invisible to everyone he passed along the street.

Had what my seatmate seen during his tour of duty precipitated this behavior? Impossible for me to say, but shouldn't the sight of a conflicted soldier trigger our curiosity? Maybe "no man left behind" needs to be a civilian call to action as much as a military one.

Maybe our worthy calls for better government services for our returning veterans need to be matched by a willingness to pay attention to the men and women who have put their lives on the line for us - and now are hurting.

How did the story end?

The soldier stood up and reached for his camouflaged backpack. Then silently he followed the agent off the plane. A moment later the door was closed and we were soon speeding down the runway. As we lifted off, I watched the terminal we had departed from fade and become a dot in the afternoon haze.

As we leveled out at 30,000 feet I wondered what the rest of his day would hold. More importantly, what would his tomorrows hold?

And what if he had never gone to war? Might his life have been like the young dad's, his age, who sat four rows in front of me bouncing a giggling infant on his lap?

Two hours later we touched down in Los Angeles, and I thought how 90 years had passed since Hemingway's soldier had returned home. My soldier was a recent arrival, as he had revealed to me, but the ghosts carried by some of those who fight our wars never age nor fade.

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