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# On Veterans Day, Remembering the Sacrifice of Those Who Served

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He died on a mountainside, far away from home. We were hours into the mission when insurgents ambushed our squad. They marred the beauty of that crisp, emerald morning with rocket-propelled grenades, chased by hellfire. He was the first one hit. He died instantly.

As our team laid down suppressive fire, the quick reaction force choppers closed in, raining mortars on the insurgents' heads. For his life, we took seven of the enemy's.

As I made my way down that slope, my feet stepping over the craggy rocks stained with his blood, I was angry. What a waste. What a waste to have died on a mountainside in a strange land, so far away from all you love.

He was a dad. He was a husband. Before his squad laid his corpse down into that black bag, they took off his wedding ring for rightful return to his wife, a widow now.

What a waste. His kids would never hear their father's footfall at the front door and say "daddy's home." On his 23rd anniversary, he would never tell his wife she was more beautiful to him than she had been on their wedding day.

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"He didn't have to die," I fumed to a senior soldier involved with the operation's planning. As I aired a litany of the doomed mission's missteps that made that soldier's death, in my eyes, senseless, he listened quietly.

He let me rant. Perhaps knowing it was the first mission of my first deployment; knowing it was the first combat death I had experienced; knowing I was a junior soldier who hadn't a hoot as to what it took to begin to plan an operation, let alone understand that when something goes wrong on the battlefield, the tremors of responsibility are perhaps felt more deeply at the top than on the ground -- he let me rant.

After having unleashed my righteous indignation on him, he looked at me soberly and simply asked: "Who knows?" "Who knows? But that soldier's death may have saved many lives?" he queried.

The question smacked of irony. In a scripted profession that's guided by precision and accuracy, where the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge are paramount -- once the bullets are fired, the smoke has cleared, and the body bags come home -- it's startling how much we don't know, and never will.

It wasn't until later when I was alone that the question haunted and humbled me. There I was, convinced that a soldier's blood had been vainly shed, when in fact I was wrong. Who knows? That soldier's life had been given for something so much bigger than I could ever fathom, at least not in my generation.

In his book *The Tipping Point* (Little, Brown and Company, 2000), Malcolm Gladwell explores how individuals, while seemingly insignificant, can be agents of big change. He likens these people to patient zero of an epidemic, the first infected with a disease that has global reach.

Soldiers are often patient zero in the pandemic of history. Our work impacts future generations in incomprehensible ways. I imagine that while running down the reddened slopes of Bunker Hill, charging through the bloody fields of Gettysburg, or low crawling across the blood-soaked beaches of Normandy, somewhere during the epic battles that shifted the course of recent history, there were soldiers like me who looked at the carnage around them and thought "what a waste." But history proved them wrong.

In the fog of war it's sometimes hard to see how a soldier's death can be anything but tragic, how it can serve a higher purpose, but it does. Who knows which soldier's life it was that became the tipping point in the Revolutionary War between colonization and democracy; in the Civil War between slavery and freedom; in World War II between genocide and regeneration? Who knows?

This Veterans Day thousands of people will visit the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington Cemetery. While the Virginia memorial pays homage to fallen service members whose names we'll never know, I'd like to think it also pays tribute to the millions of service members whose names we do know, but whose contribution to this country will remain unknown because it's something we can't even begin to quantify -- but history will.

Although he died on a mountainside far away from home, history will sanctify his blood. History will glorify his life. And history will immortalize his sacrifice.

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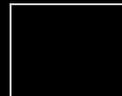


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