

On War Ryan Eisenman

I was standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, as so many before me had done, looking out across the Reflecting Pool, over the National World War II Memorial, towards the Washington Monument. An unobstructed, mile long view across the capital of the United States. It was a crisp fall day, perfect for the 99 veterans who had been given the opportunity to go on the 10th Never Forgotten Honor Flight. Between the rumble of the takeoff of airplanes, I listened to a soft-spoken Navy veteran named Walter Chun tell me about the interruption of his Hawaiian childhood by the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and his experiences during the rest of the war. It was near the end of our discussion that I asked what it meant to be able to see the memorials built in honor of America's veterans. Besides being incredibly thankful, he also pointed out that the memorials are important for civilians as well. He said, "This way, it's for the individuals to decide what's good and what's bad. I can't tell people what to think or how to feel about wars."

It wasn't until later in the day when I fully grasped what Walter meant. I had another unobstructed view of Washington, D.C. From the marble pavilion overlooking the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, I could see clear across the Potomac River, the dome of the Capitol a beautiful white dot. As I watched the perfectly orchestrated changing of the guard, I was struck by how the United States of America, like Walter Chun, had realized that war is both good and bad.

The bad, of course, is the death that comes from war. But we have chosen to honor those who have died for America. We have given them spectacular memorials, so that their brothers and sisters in arms, their families, and the strangers whose freedom they fought to protect, may come and pay homage to them. We continue to honor these brave men and women, not only through memorials, but also through a sprawling, pristine cemetery overlooking the heart of the country they died for. We have chosen to even honor those whom we do not know, by giving them an eternal, protected place of rest. We do not brush the bad parts of war under the rug. We recognize them.

But what good has come from war? Every war we have fought has been to preserve the one thing that unites an ethnic and cultural melting pot into a cohesive, cooperative nation – freedom. And the people of the United States of America have recognized that freedom did not just come out of thin air. There are people alive today who have fought to preserve it, and thankfully, we are doing all we can to thank them. We talk to them about their experiences in war. Some, like Alvin Bornbach, find that it is easier to talk to total strangers about their wartime experiences than it is to tell a family member. But when they do talk, they are passing along their stories and feelings to the next generation, who will be the ones to fight for their freedom when they can no longer do it themselves.

Then there is the Never Forgotten Honor Flight. What they do to thank America's veterans is just astounding. Every veteran is treated like the celebrity they are, and what better way to thank a veteran than to show them what our country has created to be a massive thank-you to these veterans and their friends. Inevitably, being at a memorial for their respective war, be it World War II, Korea, or Vietnam, will bring up tragic memories and mixed emotions, because there is good and bad in war. But these men and women need to know that, whatever our feelings about the intent of the war they fought in, we do not disdain them. We will always remember and honor them.

Someday, forty or fifty years from now, there may be another 17-year-old standing and gazing over the skyline of Washington D.C. as veterans watch the Changing of the Guard. The wars they fought in may have changed, the stories they tell may be different, but they are still veterans. They are still on the Never Forgotten Honor Flight. And they still deserve to be honored, remembered, and thanked for the freedom they fought for.