

Modern Heroes

By: Jessica Leigh [2010]

Throughout our childhood years we always envision heroes to be the firefighters that saved cats from trees and fictional characters that were cartooned in magazines and books. We are never able to fully grasp the concept of a “hero.” This inability changes as we all grow up; we go through different experiences – triumph and tragedy – that shape our perception and vision of the world around us. Many of us grow up seeing the hardships in life, the weak points of humanity and the brutality of war. For the veterans that I met, being a hero was under an alternative definition. To be heroic wasn’t simply saving a cat from a tree or helping a lady cross the street, it was saving your comrades, protecting your life and theirs, and protecting our country. These men grew up on a different route than those of us here at home. Their experiences shaped the gentlemen and women that they have become today; their heroic actions have changed America as a country. The definition of being a hero has changed because of their actions, and they have truly become heroes within themselves.

After seeing a film that portrayed the action-filled lives of naval aviators, Captain Nelson immediately joined the ranks of generations of soldiers fighting for America. He joined not out of force but rather out of a simple decision; he sought something exciting and saw this through the influence of a movie. After severing many months away from home, Captain Nelson recalled many moments in which his experiences changed himself and the environment around him. After completing a bombing mission, Captain Nelson and other pilots were contacted by forces on the ground. They said that morale had dropped dramatically because they had been fighting for days and had lost soldiers. Because of this, Captain Nelson was asked to do a fly-by, to raise the spirits of the soldiers fighting on the ground. Even under the risk of enemy pilots firing down on Nelson and his comrades, they still were able to complete the task and give some “life” to those soldiers

on the ground. Though this event was merely the act of following orders, they were able to help comrades in the simplest of means. To Captain Nelson this was a very heartfelt moment. By being a naval aviator and not experiencing the events of the front line, one can truly feel left out of the war. But Captain Nelson's actions did not go unnoticed; he was able to perform orders on a higher level of responsibility. He was able to look after his comrades, and this truly did make him heroic.

To Richard Luchsinger, the term "hero" appears ambiguous and unnecessary. Everyone is a hero in their own way and under their own circumstances, said Mr. Luchsinger. During his two times in Vietnam, Mr. Luchsinger experienced such horrors and situations that many civilians would find irrational and impossible. As he sat and told me about the things he saw while at war, I feel a deep amount of sadness for him and yet pride for what he has done. He wrote a story about a mission on his river boat and his comrades. As they journey to deliver supplies, Mr. Luchsinger writes of numerous sniper attacks and life-threatening occurrences that appear horrific. And they truly were. By having courage to fight alongside his comrades against enemies and looking out for the men alongside him, he was truly heroic in his actions. He was able to follow orders to a level in which they became actions that benefitted the people around him. Mr. Luchsinger said he was "fighting for the lives of every person along with the mission," and that sometimes they wondered if "anything could be worth what [they] were doing." The actions that he experienced and the problems he overcame truly made him and his comrades heroes in my eyes. They were able to follow orders on a higher level and to follow through with them for the benefit of not only themselves and others, but the uniform they wore.

Both of these men experience completely different aspects of the Vietnam War. While one was aboard an aircraft carrier and the other aboard a river boat, they each encountered the enemy on different levels and under different circumstances. Captain Nelson was able to aid the troops from the air, providing bombing missions against enemy supply lines; and Mr. Luchsinger was able to provide supplies and aid to other soldiers on the ground. Each man fought for the

soldiers alongside themselves, looking out for others and upholding their responsibilities of protecting their men. This act of going “over and above” the needed responsibility truly makes their actions symbolic. They protected their men and protected our country with the tools at hand, an act in which nobody could require more.

To some people a hero still remains as those silly characters in costumes, but to many of us a hero becomes somebody that impacts lives, everyone’s life. Whether it is the simple act of lifting morale or saving another person’s life, a hero is somebody who rises above the tasks that they are assigned. I feel Mr. Luchsinger and Captain Nelson both felt that this simply meant that they did what was necessary in any and all given situations. And this is true; they followed orders and chose to uphold these orders with a highest level of responsibility. It is somebody who is trained at a higher caliber and who uses this training and this knowledge to better humanity and to make the world better for themselves and those around them, which can truly be classified as heroic. Though I have only heard of these heroic stories through others and their experiences, I know and understand that these men are heroes. They rose to action when it was necessary and truly acted with the utmost responsibility and honor.

After speaking to these men, we have come to believe that all veterans are in fact heroes. Anyone who fought a war has a different respect for not only life, but the future of all mankind. It’s the veteran that gives and protects, it’s the veteran that reaches what no other human on earth can see or understand, especially me and my generation. It’s the veteran of any time in history, and of any war, that should be respected at the highest level, it’s the veteran that I give my thanks to for without them, we wouldn’t have the freedom that is at the world’s highest cost, the cost of life or unselfish death.

I would like to thank the veterans for sharing their stories and their experiences with me, and also the Veterans of VVA Chapter 731 for bringing to light the *real* meaning a war veteran.