A THOUGHT ON VETERAN'S DAY

written by **STEVEN OREBAUGH**

IN APRIL 1991, AS MY NAVY MEDICAL UNIT RETURNED FROM Saudi Arabia after Operation Desert Storm, I was surprised to learn that our aircraft would touch down to refuel in Spain. The former U.S. Air Force base in Torrejon, just outside Madrid, was under control of the Spanish Air Force. In 1969, my father was assigned there on a four-year tour of duty, and my family accompanied him. Two decades later, as I descended the stairway that led us from the belly of the mammoth C-5 cargo plane, I immediately recognized the arid topography of central Spain. The air was crisp and clear in early April, and squat, flat-topped mountains surrounded us.

As our company formed up on the runway, I was touched by a long-forgotten memory: While we'd been stationed at Torrejon, each Fourth of July I watched my father drill a small contingent of airmen as part of an Independence Day military parade and air show, held on the same tarmac upon which I was standing. Dad was the first sergeant of his hospital-based unit — a title that, in my eyes, gave him extraordinary importance.

Looking out over the long airstrip so many years later, I could see in my mind's eye his formation marching by as he barked a cadence, a band playing somewhere to the rear, while the heels of the marching men struck in precision with the beat of the drums. The backdrop during these expositions included Air Force fighters and bombers arrayed on the runway for families to explore. Those airshows were a young boy's dream come true: jet aircraft laden with ordnance, a marshal display of men in uniform, strains of patriotic music.

While we shuffled down the runway, at the direction of our executive officer, I considered my desert camouflage uniform, with its blackened insignia. The "mother of all battles" with Iraq had ended abruptly, as had my deployment as a Navy medical officer in support of the First Marine Division. The Iraqi army's collapse during Operation Desert Storm represented a spectacular success, and all of us were thankful that only a modest number of casualties from the allied forces had required care in our field hospital. Our small column soon filed toward a large tent, and a rumor circulated that we would be treated to steak and eggs — a delicacy we had not even dreamed of when we were on our compound in the Saudi desert.

While we waited, I pondered. How was it that a man and his son, both in uniform, walked along the same runway, 20 years apart in time, and half a world away from our nation?

Much has been written about and discussed regarding the nature and extent of the U.S. military presence across the world, and there are no easy truths that exist to satisfy everyone. But I understood at that moment that my father in his time, and I in mine, both represented the projection of American military power to foreign shores, in order to help keep the uneasy peace that has existed in most of the world since the last great conflict, or at least to keep repressive, combative nations in check.

As I approached the crowded mess tent, it was increasingly clear to me that I was part of something much larger than myself, or even my unit — a feeling both fulfilling and mystifying. Peering down at my dusty combat boots, I envisioned my father's spit-shined dress shoes treading these same steps as he paraded his men. Neither he nor I had been a combatant, but both of us had found ourselves in potentially perilous situations as we fulfilled our duties to the nation.

At that moment of mixed emotions and bittersweet memories, I had a profound appreciation for the innumerable men and women who had stepped forward, over two centuries, to wear the uniform and represent the interests of the United States, wherever she directed her soldiers, airmen and sailors to go. And most recently, as volunteers: leaving their families, imperiling themselves, surrendering the freedoms that so many Americans cherish. How admirable.

Recently, I was reminded of this remarkable devotion while reading the diary of a civil war surgeon, James D. Benton, who had written from the trenches outside of Petersburg, Virginia, to his loved ones in upstate New York, describing the protection that the distant Federal armies provided for the whole of the Union: "May the North only realize, as far as possible, that the constant watch of their faithful soldiers keeps their lands and homes from devastation and ruin. It is precisely the same as if we were protecting you while you sleep, and distance does not change the fact."

I could not imagine a more appropriate sentiment on Veteran's Day. PQ

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