



From McNamara's Morons to Fly Guard

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The nickname for combat support service members whose job puts them in the "Rear Echelon" is an acronym, "REMF." Once you know what the "R" and the "E" stand for, it's obvious that the last two letters are not flattering. Service members and veterans, like everyone else, self-categorize, making others feel less worthy if they haven't seen and done the worst of the worst.

Major Douglas R. Bey, a division psychiatrist with the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam, noted that "noncombat troops in the rear were treated with total disdain by combat troops who faced greater risk and hardship. Support and service troops were aware of how they were regarded by 'real' combat troops and felt varying degrees of guilt in their presence."

As if those in the "rear," or even here at home, are never at risk.

A headline last year from "military.com" reads, "Training kills more troops than war." Citing statistics provided by the Senate Armed Forces Committee, they calculated that in 2018, "nearly four times as many military personnel died in training accidents as were killed in combat." That's been the trend since 2011. As I wrote this, three soldiers died at Fort Stewart, Georgia, in an accident involving the tank-like "Bradley Fighting Vehicle."

We should remember that more than 10,000 casualties of Vietnam were from non-combat-related accidents, homicides, illnesses, or suicides. And that 15,000 airmen were killed during stateside flight training between 1941 and 1945. And don't assume that US bases here at home are never in the line of fire: Fort Hood, Texas, has had two mass shootings. The fact that both shooters were from their own ranks does not mean that the victims were any less of a target, directly because of their military service.

Back in 1967, Secretary of Defense McNamara convinced President Johnson to lower the standards for enlistment qualifications. Called "Project 100,000," it was outwardly intended to provide those who scored too low on the aptitude test to still get the benefits of military service. The program brought in 350,000 "Category 4" recruits through conscription and voluntary enlistment; they were referred to by some as "McNamara's Morons." Myra McPherson, author of "Long Time Passing: the Haunted Generation," described the program as "a one-way ticket to Vietnam, where these men fought and died in disproportionate numbers."

One of those "Morons" was my husband, even though he didn't realize it until 50 years later--- one might say, "how's that for stupid?" He enlisted in 1969 as a combat engineer, making him a "REMF" in Vietnam. After he left the Army, he completed a college degree in the usual four years, re-enlisted, and earned a Master's Degree. He got into Officer Candidate School and was assigned to the Adjutant General Corps with an Administrative position. But those Rear Echelon specialties were as disrespected at OCS as anywhere else, especially by those who chose Infantry or Artillery.

THE BYSTANDER



During mealtimes at OCS, a cadet was chosen to stand in the middle of the mess hall at the position of attention, holding an upright fly swatter to protect the “Tac Officers” from any airborne insects that might be attracted to their plates. The “Fly Guard” had to be fast, aim well, and most importantly, know how to dispose of the unappetizing “Kill” discretely. My husband was, and still is, an ace at zapping flies.

He is also one of the smartest people I know, living proof that calling anyone a “moron” is, well, just moronic. One of his life’s accomplishments has been composing music connected to his service in Vietnam. Performances of his “Symphony for the Sons of Nam” included the Ho Chi Minh City Conservatory when it was played there on 9/11/2001. Many Vietnamese citizens approached him, at the concert and on the streets, to offer their sympathies for the attack on his country that, not so long before, had used airplanes to bomb so many of their own people.

I’ve had people ask me “What was your war?” as if all veterans are defined by a conflict. When I tell them that one of my enlistment terms coincided with our questionable invasion of Grenada, I have to remind them what happened there in 1983, where 19 service members died. I also like to remind people that the US military has been involved in humanitarian missions as well as wars; people seem to forget that, too. It’s almost as if serving in “Peacetime” doesn’t count. But it does: Peace is the goal here.

For all those who may feel underestimated or unappreciated for not doing anything dangerous or heroic; you’ve underrated yourselves, just like they did with McNamara’s “Morons.” So, when someone says “Thank you for your service,” tell them what you did, and leave out the part where you normally might shrug and say, “I was just a supply clerk.”

You wore the uniform: There is no Rear Echelon in that.