



The Melaleuca Freedom Celebration

“I step down off with my right foot and look down. I spot a grenade just in front of me and off to the left, where I’m about to drop my left foot ... C.L. has tripped the wire attached to the grenade and pulled it from the can. It’s live.

“I know it’s too late ... My mind says, ‘Run, duck, evaporate,’ but my body won’t react fast enough. It’s like sliding on ice. No way to stop, and nowhere to go but in the direction gravity moves you. I feel a rush go through my body. I feel the stillness. My left foot touches earth. I start to take a running stride. The grenade explodes. Flames spew into my face, then there’s the smell of burned gunpowder and burning flesh ... I never hear the explosion.”

Such is the true story of Rick Eilert, a young Marine Lance Corporal who was severely wounded in Vietnam and returned home to face at least 39 surgeries. Still, he married his high school sweetheart and went on to work for the President’s Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program.

Rick’s story, though triumphant and courageous, is only a small, precious drop of gut-wrenching experience in the ocean of American wars. Since our revolution in 1775, millions of men and women have been wounded, while hundreds of thousands have died in battle and hundreds of thousands more have died of other causes during war efforts. For every one of those, there were countless more mothers and fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, and children who suffered as well.

We understand that a soldier goes into battle knowing he may have to give his life for his country—his *life*. We see this as the way of things, look at the astounding numbers of the dead and wounded, try to picture the hundreds of thousands of sweat-streaked soldiers lined up in the dirt-caked uniforms, charging forward under determined, fear-stricken faces, then hit, over and over again, one and then another falling, stumbling, some struggling to rise again, others rushing on into enemy fire. We try to imagine the hundreds of thousands of still bodies broken and dismembered in the smoky aftermath of battle.

But we can’t know it. We can’t know it unless we were there, unless we choked on the smoke in our own lungs and felt the sticky blood on our own fingers. Instead, we can see only our mind’s fabrication of those few soldiers, those few who will fit in the limited view of our experience here in the

relative safety of society. Maybe we can reference the scenes we have witnessed in films, the scenes that show a little of the blood, a little of the death, and a little of the suffering that so many endured. But as these visions come to life, we turn away, we blacken them in as if with a permanent marker, we avoid the pain, we shake our heads, we feel a faint sense of sadness, perhaps guilt, we say “that’s too bad—all those young men and women,” maybe we offer a momentary thought of appreciation and thanks, and we move on with our lives.

We move on with the lives we have been given in our free society. Do we take that

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gift for granted? Some of us vote; most of us don’t. Some of us volunteer; most of us don’t. Some of us get involved in our communities, striving to change them for the better. Others chase only after prestige and position in the realm of public office. Many of us experience the trauma of losing a job, the struggle of living on welfare, the tragedy of knowing young children on drugs. In the midst of it all, we passively scorn our leaders in government, we gossip, we joke. We find the stories of government scandal and intrigue more interesting than the poor who still walk the streets or the dwindling conditions in the public schools or the raging inner-city crime. And yet most of the time, we feel secure. We’re America. We’re a free country.

So what has freedom, which has been bought at such a heavy cost, come to mean to us today? Ask that question and some will mechanically quote the Bill of Rights: freedom of speech, freedom to bear arms, freedom to worship as one pleases. Others may answer that freedom is choice: to pursue the occupation we chose, to live where we want, to travel when the urge strikes, to choose the type of life we can best make for ourselves.

Still others may say freedom is independence, or the absence of some dominating power: no government body to repress our ideas, no secret police to knock down the doors of our houses and drag us off to prison for unknown offenses, no high-ranking official to ban an “unsuitable” book or film. Some will simply say, “Freedom is being free!” And indeed, freedom is all of those things.

Yet, true as these answers are, we may easily forget the most important element of our freedom: sacrifice. The sacrifice of the mother who, faced with the fact that her child might never return home, baked more cookies and cakes and breads than her family could ever eat just to dull the worry that constantly plagued her days. The father who worked until all hours of the night to avoid the phone and the mail, fearing the day he would find a message that his son no longer walked the earth. The wife who worried about her children growing up without a father. The nurse who toiled away in the VA hospital after years of serving in the same capacity overseas during the war. The woman who strove to bring her veteran husband out of his melancholy, at least long enough to enjoy a day at the zoo with the children. And ultimately, the soldier’s sacrifice ... his long, anxious hours in the trenches; his wrenching, painful helicopter flights to medical stations; his years of therapy and struggle in trying to recover the innocence he lost on the battlefield; his sacrifice of his very life in a ravaged field, a sandy desert, a swampy marsh or an endless sticky jungle.

It seems we may have forgotten that sacrifice. If we remember the price, if we remember the sacrifice, we realize that freedom, besides all the wonderful things that it brings us, ultimately becomes something much more: responsibility. Responsibility to ourselves and those who follow after us, to not only preserve what we have at all costs, but to make it better, to constantly polish and perfect as a sculptor creating a masterpiece.

So many lives have been lost or marred to provide us with the precious gift we have as Americans. It is our responsibility to remember, to imagine, to appreciate, to strive to understand, and, most importantly, to act, and act often in the best interest of our nation, our states, our communities, and in the sacred names of those who died for the liberty that is, whether we realize it or not, such a big part of each one of us.

To all those who have lost or sacrificed for having fought for our freedom, we salute you on this July 4th, our own Independence Day.