

Until Valhalla, Mr. Krebs

Unless you have played a role in the carnage of war, and witnessed firsthand the atrocities that follow, it is difficult to put into words the feelings and emotions that it can invoke in a Soldier. Words cannot do it justice; as certain activities cannot be expressed in words alone. Some situations can only be witnessed with the eyes and felt with the flesh. Many Soldiers have attempted to wash the blood of their enemies from their hands before returning home and forget about what they have had a hand in, none have succeeded as this is a seemingly impossible task. The horrors of a Soldier's past will haunt them for the rest of their days. A Soldier has engaged in things that most people will only read about. If black letters on white paper read from the safety of a desk can have such a profound impact, what was it like for the Soldiers sharing in such an event? The impact cannot be multiplied by less than 100-fold.

I speak from experience when I say no returning, battle-hardened Soldier is the same person that they were before they left; not a single one. Regardless of their experience overseas, how many battles they fought, how many enemies they killed or buildings they destroyed, they are changed in one way or another. Many Soldiers would like to return to the exact moment before they boarded the plane for war. Sadly, time does not wait for a returning Soldier. Times change, people change, clothing changes, politics change, everything changes while the Soldier is away fighting, totally unbeknownst to them until their return.

Ernest Hemingway, a Veteran himself, did an exceptional job in documenting some of the changes that only a Veteran would notice. These are likely changes that Hemingway experienced himself upon returning from World War I. His ability to capture the nuances in a Soldier upon returning home in his piece, "Soldier's Home," is unmatched. While reading it, I was forced to relive many things I had not considered in years. My memory was refreshed on

things I had either blocked out, or forgotten entirely. His ability to capture and pull directly from my mind, with a piece of literature written 60 years before my birth truly impressed. The weapons that Soldiers use, their tactics and the lands they fight in may change from generation to generation, but this story proves that any amount of time can pass and some things remain the same, the most significant of which are the changes in the Soldiers themselves.

I found a shocking contrast between Krebs and I from the very first sentence of Hemingway's piece. "Krebs went to war from a Methodist college in Kansas" (Hemingway 117). I left Western Kentucky University my senior year for war. I feared at the time the war was drawing down and I would miss my opportunity to partake in my generation's conflict. Hemingway does not explain why Krebs enlisted in the Marines, just that he did. Perhaps he and I had similar thought processes on the subject. Hemingway opens up describing two pictures of Krebs, before and during the war. In the war picture, Krebs is described as appearing "too big for their uniforms" (Hemingway 117). To the layman, this may have little meaning, but to the Soldier, it makes most sense. While at war, and particularly for Soldiers that are actively engaged in combat on a regular basis, the burning of calories will always outweigh their caloric intake, resulting in a loss of weight and oversized uniforms. I experienced this as did many of my comrades. By the time we returned home, we had lost many pounds and our uniforms hung off our bodies as though we were nothing more than a hanger for them to be hung. I am sure, like us, Krebs' uniform fit him perfectly before his deployment, fitted and tailored to perfection, but battle changes the inside and outside of a man in many ways, weight loss being the most insignificant.

Krebs, like I, arrived back in the United States well after the parades and welcoming parties. "By the time Krebs returned to his home in Oklahoma the greeting of heroes was over.

He came back much too late. The men from the town who had been drafted had all been welcomed elaborately on their return” (Hemingway 117). I can relate to the feeling of despair and sadness that crept into Krebs’ soul upon seeing this. My return to the United States was much the same. It is customary for families and parades to greet returning Soldiers from war. Typically, there are banners and people cheering and waving to the returning heroes. Due to my rank and position while deployed, I was asked to stay back for an additional 6 months of support. I witnessed all my brothers, people I had fought, bled, and cried alongside for months board a plane and leave me in a war zone. At the time, I didn’t think much of it, but when unfamiliar faces started showing up to replace my comrades-in-arms, I only then realized that my guys had left. Ultimately, I left country alone, with no one I knew, and no one expecting me to arrive back home. I arrived on a plane, much like I had left, to an empty tarmac and an empty hangar.

Many Civilians who have never experienced war find great difficulty in comprehending war stories. It’s not the terminology or ignorance of war – it’s the fact that amazing and inconceivable things do happen during battle, things that cannot be explained. Many believe the stories to be embellished or plain out lies. For this reason, I am very hesitant to tell anyone my war stories, except for fellow Veterans. If Krebs had found another Veteran to discuss his stories, he would have found that there was no reason to lie and that his stories would have found an attentive ear with them. He did, at times run across another Soldier to speak with, “when he occasionally met another man who had really been a Soldier and they talked a few minutes in the dressing room at a dance he fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other soldiers that he had been badly, sickeningly frightened all the time” (Hemingway 118).

Probably the most notable contrast that I was able to make between Krebs and myself was his feeling about leaving the place his war had occurred. After having spent so much time in

a war zone, experiencing so new many things, and meeting so many different people, Afghanistan became my home. Every day I feared for my life and every day I was met with hardship. Not an hour passed that I didn't miss my family and long to hold them. However, when it came time to leave, and board the plane to fly from this desolate country, I didn't want to go. I wanted to stay. I was not done there. I wished to remain. I cannot explain this longing in my gut. I despised the country and loathed many of its people. I had spent the better part of a year killing terrorists and risking my life for a people that did not appreciate it. Yet, I wished to remain. I do not know if I had become accustomed to the life, or if I had been there so long I believed this was my home, but all I know is that I was not ready to leave. To this day, I have a void in my soul that longs to go back. Krebs felt much the same way. He too did not want to leave Germany as: "on the whole he had liked Germany better. He did not want to leave Germany. He did not want to come home. Still, he had to come home" (Hemingway 119).

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *Soldier's Home*. 1925.