



In the Service of Fellow Veterans

Jeffrey L. Jackson, MD, MPH

- 1. Some people have observed that there is an *esprit de corps* within the VA, especially between the patients. How do you explain that?**

The VA purposefully instills a strong sense of mission. Ask nearly any VA employee and they can recite the mission statement, “*to care for those who shall have borne the battle,*” initially uttered by Abraham Lincoln. From the initial orientation to daily meetings, VA employees are constantly reminded of their duty to serve veterans.

This *esprit de corps* is also present among veterans. The purpose of boot camp in the military is to indoctrinate a sense of belonging, that the person standing beside you is responsible for keeping you alive in combat, an obligation that is mutual. A significant portion of veterans have seen combat in WWII, Korea, Vietnam and now in the Middle East. Nothing creates a sense of comradeship like going into harm’s way. Unfortunately, nearly everyone who deployed into a combat theatre saw a friend die or be severely injured. This strong sense of purpose and sacrifice leaves an indelible mark.

- 2. What is the best advice you could give to students and residents who provide care for veterans? What key insights could make their care for veterans better?**

Veterans are no different than nonveterans in what they want from their providers. If the patient believes you have their welfare at heart, if they trust that you are motivated to do your best for them, they will respond to you. Communication is at the heart. Be open and honest and human. Admit when you don’t know something. Seek out their underlying motivation for the visit, and as best you can,

honestly deal with it. Do not judge veterans, many have physical and psychological scars, and some have made bad choices. Listen to their stories.

3. Tell us about a moment during your service in the Army that you are most proud of (or that contributed to your development as a caring physician)?

I spent most of my military career at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I was a senior resident and was working in the ER when we gathered around the television to hear George Bush announce that the United States was going to repel Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The United States he said, but he really meant the United States' military forces – young men and women. Nearly all the military casualties made their way back to Walter Reed. I witnessed the impact of combat on soldiers and their families; a family at the bedside of a soldier with a horrific brain injury, clinging desperately to hope and misinterpreting every minimal sign of responsiveness. I avoided elevator bank 4 because that's where the amputees would gather in their wheelchairs, coming back from our amputee center. It broke my heart to see so many being pushed by their mothers or their 18-year-old girlfriends. They barely looked old enough to shave.

Old men make the decision to go to war, young men and women pay the price.

I once made the trip out to Dover to watch the dead being returned home. Each flag-draped coffin was moved from the plane to the mortuary, solemnly accompanied by an honor detail. On my visit, family members and several high-ranking officials were in attendance. I only made the trip once and cannot imagine the resilience it must take to be assigned this duty. I attended several funerals at Arlington Cemetery. On one occasion, President Bush was in attendance. I was proud to serve a Commander in Chief who was openly weeping.

I spent 21 years in the Army. What I am most proud of was the sense of purpose, honor and sacrifice that I witnessed.

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