

Veterans Day 2011

Special Forces Celebration at Vietnam Memorial Wall, St. Paul, MN

by

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My son Ben was about eight years old when it became apparent that he had an interest in joining the military. I do not come from a military family, but there was one person who

had a tremendous impact on Ben's life. This was my grandfather and Ben's great grandfather, he was a WWII veteran and served with the 34th Infantry. His name was LeRoy, but the kids called him Ay-yi.

From the time he was born, Ben and I spent a lot of time at my grandparent's lake home in northern MN. By the age of seven Ay-yi had taught Ben to clean his own fish, to drive the boat, use the riding mower and just about everything in between. He grew up following his great grandfather everywhere. As he got older, Ben constantly asked him questions about his service during WWII. He wanted to know what it was like to be in a fox hole, what it was like to shoot a big gun, what it was like to get a tattoo, what it was like to travel overseas, he wanted to know all the details. Ben hung on every word he said, admired everything about him as a

man and wanted to grow up and be just like him. He told Ay-yi that he was going to join the Army when he was old enough to do so. Ay-yi was not pro-military, but never discouraged Ben. He told him he could be whatever he wanted but that he should follow his gut and that would be the right choice.

Coming from a young family, I know that Ben was blessed to have such a relationship with his great grandfather. It was very special to watch them interact as it was evident they shared a deep respect and admiration for one another.

In April of 2001, at the age of 83, Ay-yi succumbed to cancer. Ben was devastated. He was so crushed he could barely talk about it. He said it hurt too much. It was only five months later when the terrorists attacked America on September 11th. Like the rest of the country, Ben was shaken and upset. The terrorists had not only killed nearly 3000 innocent people, but they had mocked the very liberties his great grandfather had fought for. He declared his own manifest destiny and vowed to vindicate these two painful events. He swore he was going to become an Army Ranger and find Osama Bin Laden himself and make him pay.

He spoke with a conviction I never doubted. He was thirteen.

Ben made good on this promise and went off to train with the Infantry at Ft. Benning, GA only one month after he graduated from high school. Eight short months later, he became an Army Ranger. In his first two years with the 3/75th Ranger Regiment, he deployed twice to Iraq. In the spring of 2009, his company was sent to Afghanistan. About three-fourths of the way through the deployment Ben was wounded in a fire fight with the Taliban. He was shot in the leg by a sniper. He was transported by medivac to a surgical center to repair his leg. He never woke up.

On July 18, 2009, my only child was declared brain dead and was removed from life support.

In reviewing the directives he declared in the booklet Rangers are required to complete before a deployment, Ben had noted he wished to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. I honored those wishes and Ben is now laid to rest in section 60 of those hallowed grounds where valor rests.

I have been able to visit Ben's resting place numerous times since he died and only returned from another trip there just three days ago.

I understand why he wished to be laid to rest at Arlington. He is surrounded by heroes from every state, from every generation and from every battle America has fought in.

As I scan the headstones from the point where Ben rests, there are men AND women. There are veterans from WWII downed in a helicopter whose remains were only recently identified, there are veterans who served in three wars - wow! There are Veterans who received the highest honors in the branches they served. And I can see another Ranger only two rows away who served in the same Battalion with Ben. In life and in death, they have each others backs.

I need only adjust my eyes to see the names of all these heroes.

So, when I am asked what Veterans Day means to me, the answer is simple, yet deeply rooted in what America stands for. It's about Freedom and Sacrifice.

From a young age, Ben admired any person who served America and he wanted to do the same. Becoming a member of the military is not something someone THINKS they might consider as a job or a career, I believe it is part of the genetic code each of you was born with.

From the time of Ben's death, I have been embraced by the Ranger community that Ben served with. And not just the men of the 3/75 who currently serve, but the men from the 3/75 dating back to Vietnam and WWII. I have also been embraced by Veterans from WWII, Korea, Vietnam and the GWOT in this community right here. As a whole, the Vietnam Era Veterans have supported me the most. I never knew how strong this family was until I needed to know..I have not been disappointed. Words cannot adequately express how much I appreciate the love, care and support I have been blessed with.....from Veterans.

BUT this is not solely about me or my son. We are gathered here today to honor and remember ALL veterans, LIVING AND DEAD. What does this mean to me as Gold Star Mother? More than I hope any of you will ever know. But I have a greater appreciation for the service and sacrifice of all veterans. From a very young age, Ben admired his great grandfathers service and grew to admire the service of every man and woman who served before him. It is your selflessness that helped shaped the man he would become and the legacy he would leave behind.

I need only lift my eyes and scan this crowd for heroes. You are the men my son aspired to be. He wanted to grow up and emulate what you stand for. While he is no longer physically with us, his spirit lives on and he will always be remembered for what he gave to America. A little bit of him lives in all of you, just as a little bit of all of you lived in him.

For the veterans that are here today, I thank you with all of my heart. I thank you for having a positive influence on my son and allowing me to be an incredibly proud mother because he wanted to be like you. I thank you for all you have sacrificed in the name of freedom. Ben lived and died for it and ALL of you gave a big part of your lives to ensure that I am allowed to sleep peaceably in my bed every single night.

I would like to offer a special thanks to my son United States Army Ranger, Corporal Benjamin Stephen Kopp, who wrote a check to America for his life, and by doing so, secured me a brand new family.....A family of Veterans.....A family I never knew I had and one that I am honored to be a part of until the day I see him again.

And so in this 11th hour, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, I am proud to stand here and honor our veterans. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do to make America the best country in the world. Thank you, Trudelle for asking me to speak today. I am humbled.

God Bless all of you and God Bless the United States of America.