

A Band of Brothers: *Oral Histories of Asheville's Elderly Veterans*

James L. McLelland, Jr.
University of North Carolina at Asheville
Political Science

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kenneth A. Betsalel
Community Advisor: Erika Pollard, Care Partners, Adult Day Center

Abstract

Oral history is one way of upholding the rich traditions of those veterans who have served their country honorably. In association with Political Science-374, Re-Storying Community, the university was extended an invitation to serve as volunteers at Adult Day Center, a division of Care Partners Health Services in Asheville, NC. Once engaged in service, the facility coordinators proposed an idea of documenting oral histories of the facilities elderly veteran participants. As I am a veteran, accordingly it was an honor having the opportunity to interview these heroes. Work began during the spring semester of 2012, and each Friday during the veterans meeting, time was allotted for individual interviews. The recommended questions to be asked were how each veteran felt about freedom, honor, duty, service, flag, and community as well as a personal recollection of a campaign effort or other memories from their active duty. Work began each Friday by initially attending the veterans meeting. As time progressed, the participants became trusting and forthcoming with assistance in my interviews. The interviewing process was informal and conducted on the facilities patio overlooking a garden, followed by lunch with the veteran. Seventeen local veterans were interviewed, their stories were being documented and presented to the Political Science Department, and also to the Adult Day Center for publication of a keepsake for the veterans. The work accomplished will be used by Care Partners and the Political Science Department's future classes to research volunteer opportunities with Asheville's elderly through Adult Day Center as well as assisting transitioning veterans entering the university.

Key Words: Veteran, Honor, Duty, Service, Freedom, Community

Origins of the Project

This paper is in regards to working with the elderly veteran population in the Asheville area. I chose Care Partners with the hopes of better understanding my own transition out of the Armed Forces. The Adult Day Center facilitates a daytime program for the elderly that includes a variety of activities, breakfast and lunch, grooming and personal hygiene services for those with disabilities, and a shuttle service. This program is designed to motivate the elderly by getting them out of their homes. Most of these participants are still thriving but they are unable to stay at home alone. The center provides an array of planned events such as bingo, makeovers for the ladies, music (which is among the favorite activity of most), generational movies, and crafts. Care Partners has taken great strides in generating the best experience as managed by the most courteous staff for each of their participants.

Initially, I was unaware of a veteran's presence at Adult Day Center. It was not until I arrived at the facility that the Volunteer Coordinator, Erika Pollard, and the Facilities Manager, Angie Williams, showed remarkable interest in their elderly veterans and their service to the country. After learning I was a veteran, they both proposed the idea of documenting the oral histories of the vets. Thus began a semester long endeavor in documenting experiences of seventeen local veterans from various campaigns dating back to WWII. The objective of interviewing those willing was to ask them specific open-ended questions. The facility's proposal became the initial scope of the project title, "Band of Brothers."

Through this service, the assignments varied from reflecting, journaling, and especially understanding the notion of "bearing witness." The anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff documented her experience and the guidance gained from being a participant in *Number Our Days* and provided the confidence for me to be able to make a truly profound connection within this elderly population. The goal was simply to make contact within this health care system and to promote a volunteer stance within a community structure. As it turns out, the experience was more profound.

Methods and Work Undertaken

The main objective of this project was to feature the oral histories of Veterans of Foreign Wars in a published work to be given to each participant and also to be sold at an art exhibit sponsored by Care Partners through Adult Day Center. For the university, the interviews, journals, reflections, and photographs are retained by the Department of Political Science for future reference. Adult Day Center had asked me to interview veteran participants ranging between the ages of forty through ninety-two recollecting their service. The distribution of the population was ninety percent disabled; either mentally or physically. Over half are disabled from a service connected injury from combat. Interviewing did not begin right away. I began by attending the veteran meetings. The first meeting, I introduced myself and told a little of my story (which I had yet to do) of my time spent in Iraq and Afghanistan in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. I spoke of my role in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. This set the stage for mutual trust. Not only did they want me to listen to the stories of the veterans, it is clear now they wanted me to also tell my story so I could also let go. Here are the

six questions asked of veteran participants who served in the Armed Forces: How do you feel your participation in foreign wars supported freedom?

Has serving in the United States Armed Forces given you a sense of honor?

Do you feel a sense of satisfaction in having stood duty for your country?

What branch of service did you join?

What comes to mind when you see the American flag? Is it just a symbol?

What responsibilities do you have to your community as a veteran? What responsibilities does your community have to you?

Consent forms were signed by each member that chose to be interviewed. Privacy protocols were strictly followed in accordance with Care Partners directives. Institutional Review Board standards were met through the service learning designation of the course in which this project was conducted. The community advisor was briefed before and after interviews and a weekly summary of events was submitted to apprise the staff of progress. Additionally, the faculty advisor was updated through journaling of all efforts taken in the interviewing process. The primary means of the interview was one-on-one questions and answers. The documentary portion adhered to the six questions. However, personal stories were exchanged on an “off the record” basis and became an integral part of the community experience. The approach that was used to conduct interviews was the demography method. However, a HI ZOOM external microphone was occasionally used, as well as photography. The interview data sheet was adapted from *The Other Side of Middletown*. (Lassiter, Goodall, Campbell, & Johnston, p12). Given this experience, I have been able to soundly transition into my role as not only a student, but also as a civilian. Some stories, although sometimes grim, were fascinating and insightful. The time spent with this group was a special honor and I am eternally grateful for having had the opportunity to simply spend time with each of them.

Ties to Academia

Although my initial feeling was that of institutionalized setting upon arriving at the entrance of what appeared to be any other nursing home, pleasantly, that was not the case. Early nineteenth century institutionalism is described in *Voices From the Edge*, as “Putting persons away with disabilities was preferable to having them live with their families and participate in the community, even if that participation only involved being visible in the community.” (O’Brien & Smith, p6). This outdated policy has been circumvented at Adult Day Center. Convention lies in the experience of our elders. It is within this regard academia benefits extensively from the knowledge of those that have gone before us. They opened their hallowed halls with acceptance and have been exceptionally cordial having their peace invaded and asked to recollect perhaps their worst nightmares. The stories were real and poignant. Indeed, they do not try hard to emotionally cripple you with tales of honor and courage. There lies a direct connection between their stories and believing there is something better than having something; struggling for something. For some, that struggle seemingly has shifted right back to the premise of just staying alive. Not only are they once again fighting to stay alive, but now they long to have something to look forward to. In this regard, these veterans resemble Plenty Coups in *Radical Hope* as he describes, “*After this nothing happened* . . . there was an event or a happening—the buffalo’s going away—something Plenty Coup’s can refer to as a “this,” such as after *this*, there

are no more happening.” (Lear, p2). Through this special and unique opportunity, a hopeful separation emerged from their anxiety through optimism, courage, and hope is obtainable. The concept of life-long learning is therefore emphasized from the standpoint of not only a student of higher education but as also a student of life. Volunteerism in this regard has a positive outcome for all students—especially student veterans.

This experience (within the context of academic learning) has humbled me. As I transitioned out of my comfort zone from the U. S. Navy and made my way back home to, honestly, rather strange and foreboding surroundings, life became a bit ironic. I was questioned about my choice to attend a “traditional” university by military peers—perhaps fitting in would be problematic. But this is my home. It is in this context I have benefitted a great deal from this absolutely necessary course. Yes, I am a veteran having earned that title but, I have always been a citizen of Asheville. However, through this special project of working with retired vets and reflecting on it from a oral history perspective, what I have learned is that community can be created through the sharing of time and story. I learned that my obligation as a citizen—as much as my obligation to the Navy, and my country—is my role in the community. Gaining respect and trust, I gave my gift of listening in return for their gift of stories. The stories told were not only personalized to the individual, but each one seemed as credible as the next given the nature of the elderly demographic. A piece written by Alessandro Portelli emphasizes, “Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge.” (Perks & Thomson, p37).

The Veteran

I am a retired Navy combat veteran having served over twenty-two years in the Armed Forces. I grew up in Asheville and giving back to my community through this project has meant a great deal to me. I chose this to be my first question because it is in this context recognition is deserved. For me, the term “veteran” has not yet registered. But for them, the obvious pride of being a veteran of the Armed Forces is apparent and respectful. The total years of service, campaigns, conflicts, and wars that circulate throughout the Retreat Room of Adult Day Center is quite amazing. These veterans are proud to be Americans. They have paid their dues and want to talk about current events, and to keep abreast of what is happening in their country. Slowly the gap is being bridged. As each week passed, it became increasingly evident that the community of veterans that had welcomed me in fact were in my place forty years ago, and it suddenly occurred to me that it shall be me in their place forty years from now. Hence, a “Band of Brothers” emerged and I realize we are one.

Adjusting to volunteering, I gravitated toward Major John M., United States Army, Retired, almost without even thinking about it. It was obvious John was the leader of the veterans. He sat, commanding, from his wheelchair at the age of ninety-two while conversing with his sidekick, Corporal Larry N., United States Marine Corps, drinking his coffee (cream, two Sweet & Low) and tallying the current month’s list of deaths in his “Military Officer” magazine. John recognizes colleagues he served with in this issue. He wipes his nose with one of the many colored bandana’s his father-in-law left him from his work as a railroad engineer (that day, it was a green one). John presents a different bandana each week and shows just as much pride in the collection as he does his collection of Army stories. The anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff,

describes a similar situation in *Number Our Days*, recollecting her meeting with Shmuel Goldman “He didn’t look eighty. Time had sharpened his facial planes, paring off all nonessential flesh. The lips were a thin neutral line, the eyes deep and close together, unclouded by cataracts or glaucoma. His smile was restrained and rare. Only his hair and ears and cheekbones were exuberant. His teeth were jagged and stained, but they were his own.” (Myerhoff, p45). It was her ability to see each elderly individual as an important story holder and key to understanding the dynamic of community and community service that inspired the academic side of my study. It is also this description that engages my thought of John. I have singled him out not only as the leader of his veterans at Adult Day Center, but also as my mentor for the road I have yet to travel. John has recognized this and acknowledged the fact that I tend to spend most of my time listening to all that he has to say. In many ways, those we engage in the community become our true teachers. Each one, while they may very well represent a “social problem” (in the case of aging in America) is a unique individual. My job was giving voice through oral history to their uniqueness. Establishing rapport with John essentially granted access to every other veteran. This enabled caring and empathizing as John was the most senior participant and knew everyone. Through getting to know him, my time became a collective experience. In doing so, I transformed into a participant observer—not just a volunteer, but also just another veteran in the group.

In reading *Number Our Days*, and the oral history of Dr. Myerhoff, admittedly I displayed many of the same shortcomings in attempting to find a true presence amid a group of seemingly healthy, although unmistakably guarded, and tightly knit elderly gentleman. Standing front and center, I was closely interviewed by the “old timers” who were undoubtedly the senior ranking participants of the group on my first visit to the center. After having passed inspection (so it seemed), I recognized the apparent chain-of-command structure and acknowledged the leader—Major Maltry. Like Myerhoff and others, I learned that understanding the informal social structure of the group was key to my success as a community service learner.

Honor

Honor is perhaps the cornerstone of military service. If asked what honor means to a soldier, sailor, or airman today, the response would more likely be, “a good conduct discharge.” But to these heroes, it takes on an entirely different meaning. Yes, to serve is honorable. Having honor is something altogether different. Honor is therefore earned not only through service but in overcoming the end result of such service. It has been my experience, as it has been theirs, that not all service is good. I was deliberate in formulating these questions to differentiate between “honor” and “duty.” These two are not synonymous. One is bound by duty. Honor, on the other hand, can only be earned. As such, a feeling of unworthiness captured me in the beginning of interviewing. My experiences of war boasted superiority, precision and cutting edge technology. Their experiences of war were marred with injury, blood, and for most, death. Looking around the room, this observation becomes painfully empirical as I see the disabilities of not only age, but the toll of carrying around the burden of silence—more than likely, silently honoring those that were less fortunate, those that were there and then suddenly taken in an instant. Those having honor unfortunately carry that burden of silence indefinitely unless their story is told.

Duty

To most, duty is an element of citizenship. Citizenry in the United States post Great Depression was re-vitalizing amid migration and a new socio-economic structure followed by New Deal programs to put Americans back to work. Accordingly, those drafted in support of a new America possessed a sense of duty that exemplified citizenship. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert N. Bellah discusses national community whereas, “Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a master of coalition politics, was superbly able to embody a sense of national purpose in response to the challenges of the Great Depression and World War II. It is the notion of the politics of the nation as the politics of a consensual community that helps us understand the general willingness of Americans to pay their taxes and serve in the military.” (Bellah, p202). This fervor still exists within the population of veterans at Adult Day Center. Of the questions asked, this question generated the most general explanations and responses.

Bellah (1985) suggests citizenship requires leaving the home and the church. (Bellah, 1985). Throughout the mid 1900s, for fear of being drafted, young men especially, decided to choose their own branch of service. Surprisingly, for the majority of veterans interviewed, the most desired branches were the United States Army and Marine Corps. It is this premise that further supports the dutiful role of the American citizen and subsequent veteran.

Service

In that the majority of these veterans served in the “frontline” branches during not only World War II, but also the Korean Conflict, and Vietnam, it follows that most experiences will differ vastly. However, there is remarkable fellowship among the participants at Adult Day Center. African-American, White, Jewish, or Christian, these men form a “Band of Brothers” bound by their service to our country and to each other in time of war and in time of occupation. The military kinship among these fellow veterans was astounding. No law and no decree could make them brothers as their shared military experience has. It is this military experience that has been the great equalizer among men. For those of you who are not military veterans but only associated with military veterans; you can only look into the inside from the outside. You wonder, maybe even admire, though cannot truly know the bond that a “Band of Brothers” share. Humbly, through this experience, I not only learned of oral history documentation, but I also learned that I share the same call to service through duty having earned that sense of honor from my elders. As such, the “Band of Brothers” vitalizes the community with continued recognition of the members of each branch of the Armed Forces that fought for this country. Patriotism rarely diminishes in any community regardless of race, class, or structure. To be an American is to be a patriot who is truly independent of political ideation or affiliation. For the majority asked this question, the call to service revolved around the rights and freedoms of family waiting right here in Asheville, NC. Those sentiments hit close to home for the warrior. The grand scheme of freedom identifies us as a nation; the call to freedom through service narrows the vision down to the individual and those left at home. For us, the act of war therefore is not political; it is personal.

Flag

When the vets were asked the question if the American flag was merely a symbol today, the overwhelming answer was yes. An enormous sense of pride surrounded the flag that stood in the corner of the Retreat Room at Adult Day Center. Prior to each veteran's meeting, all would rise, uncover, place their right hand above their heart and recite the "Pledge of Allegiance." Such practices have been banned from our school system, though. It is during this tradition a true defining moment occurred that related the flag to serving our country: the oath. To take the oath entails supporting and defending the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. The flag is not a symbol of that oath; it serves as the reason and rationale behind the one administering it and the one taking it. "Disappointingly, attend a sporting event and witness the majority of spectators who do not rise and salute the American flag during the presentation of colors and the playing of the National Anthem. "Those that rise more than likely served," commented one veteran. Some veterans feel as though they have been forgotten and therefore are unappreciated. Others feel as though a generation has missed an opportunity for esprit de corps and camaraderie. As such, it is a combination of apathy and empathy that differentiate those who have served from those who have not.

Community

Acknowledging the apparent chain-of-command that appeared before me was essential. Paying due respect to John, the individual in charge, established a connection between us. That seems to be the most important notion of bearing witness: recognizing these community citizens, acknowledging their contribution to the community through faithful and honorable service to our country, and showing them the respect they have earned and deserve. Sue Beaton, a Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative board member from Boston, MA validates the point discussing the creation of sustainable community in that, "'We're learning how to be a better community together' . . . "But whether we look perfect at the end is really not . . . the issue. It's how many people have participated along the way, who gets the benefits of whatever we can accomplish together, and how do we hang together and not get co-opted in the process of doing whatever we're doing." She adds, "I would like us to be a community of integrity.'" (Medoff & Sklar, p286). Such interviews confirm three things. First, the importance of the individual in community service learning. Secondly, the importance of the integrity of those who serve them. And third, the importance of the community coming together as individuals within a group or institutional setting. Where any three of these elements are missing a sense of community may be suffering.

The question now becomes, "Was a meaningful academic and community experience created?" In answering that question, Spring (2013) makes reference to the purpose of service learning, "Participation in school-based volunteer service, and especially service-learning courses with several quality elements . . . have a strong positive relationship with several measures of civic engagement, including . . . future volunteering, . . . sense of personal efficacy, and . . . interest in the current events and politics. Indeed, the strongest of these relationships are around future civic behaviors and attitudes." (Spring, p3). Accordingly, ground work has been laid to make a seamless transition from this semester of work into the next phase of the university's civic engagement through service learning courses which give future students something to look forward to. *The Community Development Reader* provides insight through

adaptation of goals; specifically, “. . . the goals of community development are: 1. provide for the everyday needs of adults and children; 2. create institutions that more fairly and democratically allocate goods and resources; and 3. cultivate relationships among people that promote human and cultural development, effective citizenship, and political will.” (Defilippis & Saegert, p6). With that, the following goal oriented objectives were implemented successfully in building a relationship with Adult Day Center:

Community Building: Supporting relations/communications.

Community Organizing: Achieving goals/solving problems through tasking.

Community Development: Creating economic capacity/exchange.

Palmer (2011) describes the capacity to create community in *Healing the Heart of Democracy* in that, “In a mass society like ours, community rarely comes ready-made. But creating community in the places where we live and work does not mean abandoning other parts of our lives to become full-time organizers. The steady companionship of two or three kindred spirits can kindle the courage we need to speak and act as citizens.” (Palmer, pp45-46). Thus, a community was in fact created by this experience. The time and work with these citizens enabled me to be a better citizen thereby establishing not only communal relationships with the participants, but with the Care Partners community as a whole. Christopher Lasch quotes Robert Nisbet’s definition of “community” in which, based on this experience, I agree, “By community, I mean something that . . . encompasses all forms of relationships which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time. Community is founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in the social order. It draws its psychological strength from levels of motivation deeper than those of mere violation or interest. . . .” (Reynolds & Norman, 1988).

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

The primary challenge I faced was not to disrupt the sanctity of this tight-knit group of elderly citizens. At first, I was unsure as to the gravity of the questions but was reassured by the community advisor that in fact these selectees wanted to speak about their service. Afterward, I became unsure as to whether I was ready to speak of my experiences. Through a collective participation, though, I was guided through my own uncertainty of disclosure and found through listening to their stories it became a therapeutic means for me to attempt to tell them mine. Once a dialogue had begun, the freedom of exchange flowed uninhibited.

The only other challenge I faced was dividing my time equally among the participants. It became easy to spend all of my time with one person. Thus, becoming attached to a “favorite” participant was easy. This, I thought, was problematic. However, it was not as dire as I anticipated and the others could be found enjoying the various activities the facility provides hour by hour. But, breaking free to do the job took a disciplined approach and getting past perhaps hurt feelings. It got easier to overcome the feeling of neglect as time progressed. Each had their own activity they enjoyed doing and allowed me to mingle with them individually as time progressed. The relationships that were formed with true heroes can never be replaced. I was given a rare opportunity to spend time with people that miraculously were sitting beside me.

The stories of despair and hardship, although ambivalent, were as common as the camaraderie that emerges on the field of battle. The stories were untainted and gritty and it was difficult to move on to the next series. It was in the process of conducting these oral histories that a real sense of healing took place. It should be noted there is no real closure to a soldier's story, only a deeper sense of compassion that comes from sharing one's experience. There were multiple strengths fortifying this project, the most obvious being the great team dynamic between the facility and the university.

Results

Interviews collected indicated a diversity of service from various conflicts. The majority of the veteran population served in World War II. Over 75% of them were awarded a Purple Heart while half of them were awarded the Bronze Star. There was one United States Army Green Beret and one participant is on the review list for the Congressional Medal of Honor for gallantry amid the attack on Pearl Harbor. The ratio between the composition of officer to enlisted was roughly 1:4 which is fairly customary relating to the size of this interviewing group, (with regard to a typically small platoon).

Over twenty hours of interviews were conducted and completed documentaries were turned into the volunteer coordinator, Erika Pollard. In turn, these stories were published into a keepsake tribute that was featured at one of the facility's events. Additionally, the project was featured in the unc asheville MAGAZINE Volume 4, No. 2 (Summer 2012).

Sustainability

The accomplishments made bridged the gap between ongoing civic engagement from the university perspective and making lasting connections with a community health service provider. Future classes will have the same acceptance by the facility to continue the communitarian efforts. The professionalism, cooperation, and support from the staff members were exemplary; each visit was welcomed and treated with courtesy. Invitations to stay for lunch became routine and the staff was genuinely receptive of the university's presence. A special gratitude must be given to Angie Williams and Erika Pollard. These ladies provided feedback and were always available for guidance and follow up. Their unfailing support and the jobs they do are conducive to the quality of life these elderly participants received.

From the standpoint of a veteran-student, this opportunity truly provided an outlet for better understanding my role as a veteran. In that the University of North Carolina at Asheville is proactively engaged in the success of its veterans, accordingly enrollment in service learning courses that enable interaction with community veterans is highly recommended. Just having the chance to listen to those that have been exactly where I am enabled a smoother transition for me departing the service, personally. Again, remarkably, it is him—it is them—that willingly paved my way into an unknown future. I am them forty years ago. They are me forty years from now.

Conclusion

The nation will always owe a debt of gratitude to her sons and daughters that serve willingly for the rights and freedom of all. I firmly believe this. We have all taken unique paths that shape our lives. After a twenty-two year career in the United States Navy, I find myself reflecting on my journey as I look forward to my upcoming graduation. I am probably as “non-traditional” as students go. But, I would travel the same path exactly without revocation. I compile my experiences at Adult Day Center with a great deal of pride, admiration and appreciation. It has been my privilege not only to be a member of this especially compassionate and caring campus, but also to have the distinct honor to have been accepted within the fellowship of America’s sometimes forgotten heroes. Through my commitment of volunteering a portion of my time to this health care provider I have not only been given the opportunity to fully appreciate our veterans, but also, more importantly, the experience fortified me as a newly transitioning veteran myself. The experience ensures I have taken a positive role in my community and I have acknowledged that empathy, identity, and understanding are key elements of citizenship. These values have now become my duty to uphold.

Everyone has a story to tell—especially vets! There are more stories awaiting an avid and compassionate listener. The only opportunity cost associated with simply sitting with an elderly gentleman that served his country is more likely time. However, throughout that time I can attest that the listener will also pay with the elements of citizenship. Not only that, it is impossible not to become overtly sympathetic, veteran or not, in the presence of a true hero that bled, sweat, and cried for our freedom. As a newly appointed veteran, I am less likely to understand the interest, if any, in my service. Although one day will come, I am certain, whereas I may find a younger version of me looking for explanations. As the gift of stories has been bestowed upon me, I shall willingly give that gift back someday. The notion of this interaction is simply that significant.

Additionally, the positive experience and time spent at the Care Partners facility on Sweeten Creek Road in Asheville, NC dispels any rumor of aging in American to be harsh and abusive in the care of a provider. It has also put to rest is the notion that veterans are insignificant. This health provider is setting the standard of quality care giving that goes above and beyond. This opportunity has been especially rewarding in part of my status as a veteran but, more importantly, Asheville remains my hometown. These gentleman interviewed are not only my brother veterans, they are my neighbors.

Finally, Friday became a special day at Adult Day Center. Scheduling permitted interviews to be conducted each Friday during the allotted time for the veterans meeting. That was an honor. But, the routines were still in place prior to interviewing. First, each veteran that arrived would throw a couple of dollars in the center of the floor. When asked about this, the answer was the money went into the veteran’s fund. This fund was used for condolence gifts whenever a brother or sister was relieved from watch (passing away.) Hence, the proceeds of these stories being published would augment the fund as being relieved of watch was no longer a question of if, rather a question of when. Secondly, the veteran coordinator would present either a current event or an event from the past of military significance. Discussion of whichever topic would ensue and, at times, a dissenter from a different branch would emerge. These concluding thoughts ring of importance because these are identical routines of the active duty ranks. It serves as a reminder that there are truly certain ways of conduct that one cannot escape.

Perhaps most befitting to my study, and most importantly, each Friday after the Pledge of Allegiance and a moment of silence for fallen brothers, one vet stands bowing his head and says a prayer. It is within this context that the questions I prepared to ask become essential. For ones freedom, honor, duty, service, and community are all being wrapped around this piece of cloth colored red, white, and blue. I have searched for these colors from afar through sand filed skies. I have worn these colors amid chaos and confusion, through victory and defeat. I accepted my oath and rationally defended this piece of cloth; not as a symbol, but as a nation of my countrymen. It is therefore I, too, bow my head in thanks for finding my way back home safely and in one piece. It is during this time of silence and reflection that a true sense of community consumes us all. Our thoughts and experiences become one and the knowledge from them becomes prevalent to me. A Band of Brothers stand side by side and witness together what used to be, what is now, and inevitably what will be. Through witnessing, I thank Him for them, for us, communally.

This I pray:

*“Lord, what is man, that Thou has
regard for him?
Or the son of man, that Thou takest
account of him?”*

*Man is like a breath,
His days are as a fleeting shadow.*

*In the morning, he flourishes and grows up
like grass,
In the evening he is cut down and withers.*

*So teach us to number our days,
That we may get us a heart of wisdom.”* (Myerhoff, p215)

Amen.

After this, there is something after all. This prayer was used in titling Barbara Myerhoff’s ethnography *“Number Our Days.”* What one learns in doing community service learning projects through oral history is that academics of the real life of people eventually do come together. One can choose to put labels on people, or allow people to tell their own story in their own way. I have chosen to do the latter in this project due in no small part because I am them, and while at times messy with real life, crossing those lines has allowed me to put my liberal arts education to work in seeing the world as it is and to embrace my veteran status with pride. For this, I am truly grateful.

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