



## A Veteran Reflection

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“I already lost one and I don’t want to lose another” and with that my mother walked into her bedroom and shut the door. That was my mother’s reaction when I told her I had enlisted in the Air Force. My brother, Randy, had been killed in Vietnam.

I served my entire enlistment during peace time. There were no wars, conflicts, or deployments. We were in the middle of the cold war. The only time we ever got bombed was when me and my fellow airmen would frequent a local pub. Someone asked me once if I ever saw combat. I told then the closest I came was the day the dining facility ran out of shrimp. Italy was a dream assignment. We would complain about working twelve-hour shifts, our relief being late, working in the rain or having to train on a day off. During one alert, I was assigned to guard a cement slab. I stood guard twelve hours in the rain guarding a simulated aircraft. We never got shot at. There was no reason to complain but we did.

Buck, Brick, Wenz, Tug, T-Bone, Spanky were some of the guys I served with. Rarely did anyone call you by your given name. Nicknames were the norm. We became family. We worked together and played together. Most of the guys were not married and we would travel together. We took trips to Munich, to Rome, to Venice and other small towns in Italy. We learned about each other and from each other. We formed a brotherhood. We shared stories, created stories, and formed friendships.

After my three year tour, it was my time to leave Aviano and venture back to the states and transition into civilian life. I remember some of the guys accompanying me to the flightline and waiting with me until I boarded the airplane. Just prior to leaving, one of the guys said, “We’ll see you around.” I responded with, “No you won’t. Once I board the airplane, I’ll probably never see any of you again.” I had spent almost three years with these guys and knew them better than my own family. I also knew that once I left the chances of seeing them again was nearly zero. I boarded the plane and flew out of Aviano in March of 1987.

The hardest part after being discharged from the service was not the transition back to civilian life but accepting myself as a veteran. I went to my local Veteran’s office to see what if any benefits I qualified for. I was told because I was a

peacetime veteran the only benefit I was entitled to was a free dental examination from the VA Hospital. I had the examination and went on with my life.

I always felt less significant than veterans that served in time of war or conflict. Their sacrifices were greater than mine. I served three years in Italy. We sat in local pubs drinking beer and trying to image what World War II was like. What Europe must have been like forty years before us. We complained when we had an eight-hour two-man foot patrol in a secured area. Not once did we think about walking down a road or across an open field never knowing if you going to come under fire. We didn't have the fears those servicemen must have had. Those that survived earned the right to be called veteran. Those that didn't survive were called heroes.

I never attended Veteran's Day programs because in my mind they were reserved for the true veteran. I felt guilty whenever I was asked if I was a veteran. I was reluctant to check veteran on job applications. It took almost thirty years for me to accept the fact I was a veteran.

There are, in my opinion, few positives about Facebook but the one it gave me was the opportunity to reconnect with guys I served with. I found a Facebook group with members from my old Aviano Security Flight and I joined. In 2018, a 40<sup>th</sup> Security Police Flight reunion cruise to Cuba was scheduled and I told Heidi we were going. Two of my best friends from Aviano were going along with a number of guys who served before and after my time at Aviano. Before the cruise, we met at a local bar in Tampa with some other Aviano buddies who were not going on the cruise. A major breakthrough for me in accepting the fact I was indeed a veteran was when Bobby Mason gave me an Air Force veteran cap. It was the first thing I ever received that indicated I was a veteran. Bobby has since passed away and I now display the hat with my Air Force memorabilia in his honor. That night, in the bar, we laughed, joked and shared stories. This was the first time in thirty-one years that we were together again as a family. It was as if time had stood still.

We talked about life after Aviano. It was during one of these conversations, when my old roommate told me he had the same feelings I did about being a veteran. I realized I wasn't the only one. Talking with Jeff was exactly what I needed and I hope he felt the same way. I finally understood that a war doesn't make you a veteran. It was an honor to serve my country and fulfill my commitment whether

or not there was a war did not matter. Not everyone makes that commitment and some even try to avoid it.

When I returned from the cruise, I went back to the Veteran's office to see if I qualified for any veteran benefits. It was a different Veteran Services Director. With his help, I was able to qualify for veteran benefits.

A second Aviano reunion was held in August 2023 in Williamsburg, Virginia. This reunion was more special than the previous reunion. This reunion was for any members of "D Flight" that served in Aviano from 1984-87. "D Flight" was my original flight. Twenty members of "D Flight" came to the reunion. Most of them I had not seen since 1987. Just like the first reunion, we picked up where we left off. Laughter and stories were the norm for the weekend. One of the guys cried when he saw everyone. For most of us our uniforms no longer fit, our hairlines are either gray or receding however, most importantly we were a family again. Some of the guys only did one enlistment like I did while others made it a career.

Now with my veteran's cap on my head and hearing aides in my ears I shuffle when I walk. If I had the opportunity I would do it all over again if I could serve with the same guys. A veteran is a member of a unique brotherhood that others see. However others cannot completely understand it.