

REVOLUTION

By Sebastian Roberts

CHAPTER ONE: The Pledge

“And, salute.”

Hands snapped to foreheads, the rim of caps, or to cover a heart.

“I pledge ...”

First one voice, then many.

“...allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God with liberty and justice for all.”

Everyone was still for a half second before the first voice gave the order.

“To.”

Hands snapped down to thighs.

“Parade rest.”

Everyone relaxed into a stance that was easier to maintain, but it wasn't until the voice said, “Stand easy,” that bodies were fully at ease.

Some of the bodies were young and hard. Ted was one of those. He had been released from active duty two months earlier. Even though he had numerous civilian friends, he found that he missed those with whom he had shared a decade in uniform. Behind him, in the loose half-circle of veterans who faced the podium, stood a slightly more mature woman. Stacey was slightly closer to forty than thirty and had been an Army nurse for fifteen years. From where she stood, and during the recitation of the pledge, she had kept one eye on the flag and one eye on Clyde who occupied the spot next to her. Clyde had to let go of his walker with one hand to salute the flag and Stacey was on high alert in case he lost his balance. She had tried to talk him into sitting, or at least foregoing the salute, but he would have none of it. Billy, on the other side of the arc of bodies, was unable to stand, but even from his wheelchair, the others in the circle could see his body stiffen at the command of ‘attention’ and remain so

during the pledge. Even Sandy, the big Chocolate Labrador held himself erect on all fours during the pledge and sat when he heard the command to stand easy. Like Stacey, he kept one eye on the flag, but never lost track of the Staff Sergeant Taylor who had become his friend as well as his responsibility. There were others too. Some, like Ted, had joined the group soon after being discharged, but overindulgence and the lack of a forced physical discipline had grown paunches like the garden grew weeds. Glancing around, I could see the long thin scar on Jim's arm that had been made when he had his bypass surgery. Just below my own collar bone, I could see the lump created by my pacemaker. These are the men and women of my American Legion post.

Mixed in with them, were the sons, daughters, wives, and mothers of these members and of others, who had already passed on, or who were members of other posts in other counties and states. These people formed the Auxiliary and the Sons of the American Legion. From the podium, the Commander addressed the group.

"Today is Veterans' day. But, of course you know that or you wouldn't be here."

Our Commander thought he was a comedian. Sometimes he said something funny, but he was far from being reliable in that regard. He was reliable in other ways, though, and that was why he had been elected to the post of Commander. His tall frame was neither well toned nor 'gone to hell,' as he liked to say. As a Former Marine, and an officer at that, he carried himself well. As I watched from my place near the back of the crowd, the thought came to me that the way he and other Marines stood and formed a presence in a room or a crowd, or even on the beach wasn't what most people thought. My civilian friends, and a lot of the P.R. pieces you saw about Marines portrayed that stance as pride. There's even one billboard that claims them as "The few, the proud, the Marines." But I can tell you from experience that the images used of those Marines do not reflect pride. What people mistake for pride is readiness. Pure and simple.

"Welcome!" the Commander said. "I was asked to keep it short. Please stand ready as our Chaplain leads us in prayer."

We all liked the new Chaplain. He didn't mince words but got right to the point.

"Lord, give us the courage to change the things we can, the serenity to accept those that we cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference. Everyone please take a quiet moment to add your own invocation in silence."

After twenty seconds or so, he said, "At ease," and relinquished the podium to the Commander.

"Today we honor our veterans. As I prepared my remarks, I thought that it might be appropriate to offer a simple definition of what constitutes a veteran. Simple, huh? A veteran is a person who has worn the uniform and served the nation. That is simple. Too simple. To really understand, we all need to reflect on what that means. I hear people on the radio or evening news talking all the time about a serviceman or woman who *made the ultimate sacrifice*. While true, there's much more to that story than the simple phrase can convey."

"For starters, no one decides to make that ultimate sacrifice as the ship is sinking or as his fighter is falling apart at twenty-thousand feet or in the middle of a barrage of incoming rocket-fire. No. Every soldier, sailor, airman, marine, and guardsman gives his life for his country when he signs his enlistment papers. If he survives, he gets it back."

"Now, I know I didn't use the politically correct gender-neutral pronouns in that statement, but I don't really care. We all know that the members of our fairer gender do their part, in fact often-times, they do much more than their part."

"Something else to know about our servicemen and women. In defense and service to a nation that values personal freedom about all else, the service member voluntarily relinquishes most of those freedoms. The drill instructor decides when you get up, what and where you eat, and even when you can use the head. That's the can, for you ground-pounders. And no one decides to go to a war zone. Nope, there's some guy in BuPers (Bureau of Personnel) who more or less randomly decides that this soldier is going to the battlefield and that one is going to a recruiting office in Kansas."

"Over at the Veterans of Foreign Wars, they make a distinction between these two groups. Here at the Legion we have the Auxiliary, composed of the ladies who did not serve, and the Sons of the Legion, composed of the men who did not serve. Over there, the regular membership is made up of those who were in a combat zone, whether they saw combat or not. A sergeant processing paychecks at a desk somewhere can still be tagged as a combat vet. Is that right or wrong? Who cares? My point is that ... wait. Let me remind you of a line from a poem by John Milton. It was not originally about the clerk I mentioned, but has come to be over time. Milton wrote, *They also serve who only stand and wait*. Like the clerk filling out paperwork to send more ammunition to

the front or more avgas to the carrier, the mission cannot be accomplished without those not in the combat zone.”

“And so it is here. During the course of their tour of duty, our veterans have become accustomed to the support offered by those desk-jockeys. Here, at the Legion, as well as at the VFW, AmVets, and others, our mission is to provide a place where these brothers and sisters can come together and know that there is support. Support from each other and from the Auxiliaries, Sons, Patriot Guard Riders, and many others.”

“Where I’m going with this is to a very serious problem that requires our support for our veterans and this post will launch our response to it on this Veterans’ Day. In combat, our veterans know that if things go to shit, there will be people who will send reinforcements, extraction teams, air cover, or supplies. Whatever is needed is on the way.”

“Alone in a civilian world where many people may not understand, some of our veterans feel alone. Some feel what many felt after the Vietnam conflict. They can feel not only alone, but rejected. As the Commander of this post, I can tell you that these men and women need our support more than ever. The suicide rate among our veterans is much too high. Hell, one a year is too high. Sure, there is a suicide prevention hot-line, but do our veterans know the number or when to call? Do they feel so alone that they don’t care if they call or not?”

“Unfortunately, even though the suicide rate among veterans is more than twenty per day, that is a national number. That means that the one or two per week who may consider suicide in our state are lost in the millions of other people who live here. I’ve struggled with this question: How do we reach those one or two?”

“I don’t have an answer.”

“On this Veterans’ Day, I do call on each and every one of us to do what we can. Take notice of our veterans. Offer that friendship and support. Invite them to come in for a drink, a game of pool, or a holiday dinner.”

That concluded the formal portion of our Veterans’ Day Ceremonies. It would be followed by an open pit cookout out on the party deck. As everyone filed out of the hall, I noticed two relatively new members who had hung back. Hailey Marie Stanton and Lisa Sue McBride had become engaged in what was a serious discussion.

This is their story.