



Our own All Eritrean Veterans

Like all soldiers coming back from a war, Eritrean veterans coming back to a civilian life they have left for decades, have had a hard time adapting to their own families, the schools they left behind and the time that stagnated in their memory.

All veterans tend to remember their time in the field as a heroic part of their life. They cannot control their memory, for they take refuge in it.

They spend their days remembering all the ambushes to trap the enemy, the strong points of their dedication to the well-being of their country. Single images that keep rolling in their heads with no control to stop them.

Once they are back home they tend to discuss events of the war in a very logistic way. But always among themselves, former war veterans.

While in combat they were trained to shut down all their emotions, forget all ties to a life based on love for a woman, love for a man, responsibilities of their own family....all they had to focus on – during the war - was survival. So all sense of humor, grief, love, pain.... just shuts down.

This is very painful for families when the soldier comes back.

We – families left behind – stare at them when they do not shed a tear at funerals, at their own baby's birth, when they tell about childhood people who died in battle fields as if they are talking of the daily weather. At times they just look like humans carved out of a block of marble.

All personal life gets shut down. So a civilian spouse who spent her years raising the kids alone, wonders if the husband – coming back from the war - still loves her.

For the veterans it is all about a defense mechanism that shuts down in order to prevent hard memories of war to come up and a mental status helping create a space of their own with no obligations to adapt to this un-known civilian life.

They look all right on the outside, but it is quite a jungle of feeling on the inside. They try to have authority over anger towards a system that did not make veterans' financial well-being a priority.

A system that did not prepare doctors to cope with adjusting back to a life that they – veterans – left hanging in their own houses' closet and try – decades later for those who made it - to understand that time has passed for family members left at home as well. The young and gorgeous wife they left behind is now old with all fading of age showing in her body. The kids they left as toddlers are now taller than the soldier father or soldier mother. There are so many years in between-them. Like they each lived in different planets. While both sides know that they were only kilometers away living in the same country and sharing the same land.

This feeling of shut-down-all-emotions worked well in a combat life. But works all the opposite in a civilian life that moved so fast while they were away. That absence of control can make veterans angry and destructive upon their own self. The rage against the enemy cannot be placed anywhere, for the enemy is no more there.

There is sleep-loss, there is anger that explodes in a heartbeat. There is no more quality sleep.

Many turn to alcohol. Alcohol is a self-prescribed medication; most of the times it starts with the utopia that it will make the anger go away and set the mind free of all questions rotating constantly in their minds.

They refuse to admit that is it a mental drug. Like all drugs – though -- it makes the person get back from that sleep angrier and more obsessed with living a life made of remembrance of the heroic battles and past glory. All those victories upon the enemy are gone from their daily life now; they discover that people around them are not the enemy, but civilians commuting and running to catch the metro.

Alcohol becomes the best friend that never leaves them. The companion that asks them to have some more. Little do they want to admit that their entire body is slowly being cut in pieces invisible on the outside.

Alcohol also becomes the hidden mistress of dark alleys where cats and garbage containers do not know who they are. All drunk people look alike with their scraggly beard and untamed hair. They ripped clothes and smelly tinted button down shirt. A tear rolling down their cheeks. All alone with their memories and their anger.

The system should have provided all it takes to prevent our veterans retrieve in their own world made of past battles and mistrust as self-defense. It should have prepared them to go from a warrior life to a normal every-day routine life.

A friend/veteran told me - after our Independence - that he was invited by his family to visit Washington DC. The first time him and his family were stuck on the beltway (highway) for several hours, his mind could not stop thinking how he would get out if this would have happened somewhere in the field. Because during the war, staying idle on the same spot would have exposed him to danger with roadside bombs or enemy's attacks. When something makes the soldier - coming back from war - stop (let it be a traffic jam, a line at the gas pump, etc.) his/her first thinking is: "how do I make it out?"

As for us –civilians, - we puff and curse about the time we are losing from day-care pick up or dinner time.

Our very first government should have asked doctors to volunteer, invest government's funds to provide free clinics for our veterans. Maybe apply the 2% tax only and solely to be invested in veterans' well-being.

All societies and all communities abroad should give Eritrean veterans the honor and assistance they deserve.

The simple reason is that they are lost and they should not have faced exile from a land they gave their blood and life to defend and give freedom to their own people.

The largest majority does not make it to adopt to life in a foreign country. As a result, many fall in the abuse of alcohol, some even end up using drugs and face jail time.

Lining up at foreign Immigration offices is one of the utmost insult to our veterans. Stretching their hands to receive food stamps to feed themselves and their families is the killing fields they wished their remains were buried at.

They feel that they have been dropped into another planet by fate from the land they fought for.

While all refugees are ready to accept the new rules of a country they chose and are asking asylum from, veterans never do accept said life as a first choice. They fought to go back home as heroes. They dreamed of kneeling down on their parents' graves. They dreamed of searching for the sweet-heart girl they kissed last.

Instead a government that was supposed to embrace them, salute them and help them plan to build a system to honor them, simply ignored them. Those who asked for rights were dismissed or pushed to leave the country and live life in exile. The high officials who brought their battalions back from war and led our veterans to the fall of our capital city – Asmara - simply looked the other way while all this was happening.

So what can we – Eritreans living abroad – do for our veterans?

- First and foremost, acknowledge them as veterans. ALL OF THEM: ELF, EPLF and in-between....they are all our valiant veterans.**
- We should mobilize to form a veterans' group honoring them.**
- While Eritreans are facing immediate problems and are in need of urgent assistance, our veterans should receive the daily honor they deserve nevertheless!**
- We should create a day called “Eritrean Veterans’ day” and celebrate this day in each major city of the continents we live in.**
- Make them believe with an open heart and an open mind about our love and respect and give them an iota of the huge acknowledgment they deserve.**
- Simple education for us and a simple hand-stretching towards them – our Veterans – would lower the level of confusion they were thrown into by a system that never made them a priority.**

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