

Museum News: Our Disabled Veterans

by C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

When Memorial Day and Veterans Day roll around every year I often think back to my undergrad days at Sul Ross in the late '60s. I was in the Chamber Singers and every spring we would go on tour around West Texas.

This particular time we were in Big Spring to sing at the Officers' Club of Webb Air Force Base. The captain in charge asked if we would mind singing at the VA hospital to the older veterans that were in a ward there. Of course our director, Ross Hise, said yes, even though we were on a tight schedule.

When we arrived we went upstairs to the ward and the men that were able came out into the rec room and we gave our concert. The men filed into the room, some able to walk on their own, some with crutches, mostly in wheelchairs. They were a mix of older men from WWII and Korea, young Viet Nam guys and some really old men, probably from WWI. These were all men who were there for therapy or long term recuperation, but a few actually lived there, unable to leave because of their wounds or the lack of family to take care of them. When I saw the young men my age, many with missing limbs, I could hardly sing. It was touching for us young college kids to see this. I know I certainly had not been around men like this before, and of course my mind wandered to my own draft eligibility and the thought that I could end up like this.

As we got ready to leave, a young nurse came up to one of our choir members, Mary Robison of Fort Stockton, who had been a nurse and an acquaintance of the younger nurse. She asked if Mary could come to a room and help with an oxygen bottle for a patient...they were having trouble connecting the bottle to a patient's equipment. Of course Mary, good soul that she was, agreed.

In a few moments she came back with mission accomplished, but with an almost shocked look on her face. She related that the man in the room was a World War I veteran who had been gassed in his trench in France. His lungs and throat were so severely damaged that he could not leave the hospital...ever. He had spent the last 50 years in military hospitals and finally the VA. He had given up his whole life for his country, with no prospect for a family or career, just endless days in a hospital bed, too injured to do much more than lay there. To make matters worse, he had outlived his family members and there was no one to come visit him anymore.

I don't want to preach, but there has to be more that we can do for our disabled veterans than just say thanks. On Memorial Day we honor those who gave their lives to protect our country. On Veterans Day we honor those who served in the armed forces. But, the disabled veteran often falls through the cracks. It is easy to say thanks in a public forum like Facebook. The least we can do is hold our government accountable for them, to clean up the terrible VA mess, more than just put band-aids on the problems.

But beyond that, we can do something on the local level. Nursing homes are full of veterans. If you don't know any, then go make their acquaintance and visit them often to raise their quality of life. It won't be easy...most of these places are bleak and smelly, but these men and women deserve more. Don't just say thank you on Facebook one day of the year...say thank you as often as possible to veterans you know, to human beings that need you. And if you don't know any veterans, get yourself to a nursing home and make their acquaintance...they are waiting to meet you.

