

There is a tremendous amount of turmoil in the world. The economy over the past year has had a tremendous negative impact on many. Job losses, homelessness, healthcare, and many other topics would make you think the world has seen better days....but the world has seen much worse as well. I sometimes wonder about Thanksgivings during World Wars I and II. What were our soldiers in the frozen fields of France and forests of Belgium thankful for when Thanksgiving Day arrived? What was Thanksgiving like for Robbie Risner and Bud Day and John McCain and James Stockdale in the Hanoi Hilton? What were Stockdale and McCain thankful for on November 22nd, 1973, their sixth Thanksgiving in captivity and Risner's and Stockdale's eighth? As Thursday arrives and somewhere on a Mountaintop outpost in Afghanistan a group of young Army soldiers stops to celebrate Thanksgiving, what will they be thankful for?

For anyone who can't be home on Thanksgiving with their friends and family here is what I think all of us, in better or worse conditions, think of when that day comes. I am thankful to live in a country where I can practice the faith I so choose or not at all. I will tell you though, for anyone who has been on a field of battle, some of us in palaces, some in muddy foxholes and trenches, and some in inhumane prisons... "There are no atheists in combat" To a man, Prisoners of War in the Hanoi Hilton will tell you faith was their most prized possession and gave them the strength to survive...they knew no matter how long it lasted or how bad it was going to get...no one could take away their faith. Pick up a copy of Robby Risner's "Passing of the Night" (signed and worn-out copy might still be in the library of the First Presbyterian Church of Beaver PA) or Bud Day's "Return with Honor." When you get to the part where all the prisoners were gathered into one room for the first time in years, many seeing each other for the first time, and read about how they celebrated by holding a church service and instead of Hymns sang the National Anthem and God Bless America...let me know how many of you are still not thankful for all that you have.

We are thankful for our families. All three of them! First, I am thankful for great parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, sister, brother, my wonderful wife and my children. They define who I am. I am thankful for them everyday not just on Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving just puts a laser-like focus on the subject and we all feel the same way. How do I know? I take you back to Balad, Iraq on Thanksgiving Day of 2003. I was the deployed commander of the 32nd Combat Communications Squadron, (I privilege given to me by my good friend Riz Ali as this was normally his unit at home station). Being deployed in a combat zone with a close knit group of people who do everything together is an experience like no other. You will never forget the people you served with...how hard you worked...how hard you played...and how well you took care of each other. I remember walking over as a group of about 12 or 15 of us to the dining facility to eat our big Thanksgiving Day meal. The lady from Louisiana who was in

charge of the DFAC had really gone overboard and the meal was unbelievable considering where we were. Just like home, we filled our plates with enough food for two meals. We all sat at the same table. We stopped to pray.....and then we just sat there.....half playing, half eating our food and nobody said a word for the next 5 to 10 minutes. Any other day there would be stories and laughter and the whole place usually sounded like the county fair. Not on Thanksgiving. When I looked up for the first time at my deputy, Brian Richardson, sitting across from me, we both just looked at each other and down the table and it was obvious everyone was lost in the thoughts of home. It took 15 minutes or more to bring back the life of a normal meal with laughter and smiles but everyone needed those 10 minutes or so to be with a distant family.

The second family I am thankful for are those same people who sat around that very table in 2003. The military is one big family and never more so then when you deploy. It's that family that kept young soldiers alive and well in the trenches of World War I and it will be that same family that keeps a smile on the faces of the Army soldiers on that mountaintop in Afghanistan. It's the First Sergeant who puts everyone else's family ahead of his own. It's that same family that takes the time to take my son out on an ATV for a day when dad's not home and shows up to help move your worldly goods to the next house on base. It's that same family who despite serving in a different time and different place smiles and shares a common bond across the years. Different plane, different rifle, different part of the world...same spirit. It's that same family that despite years of separation and lives that took different turns find themselves in later years living closer than they might have ever guessed and still enjoying each other's company. The military family endures through it all in good times and in bad...and these are very good times indeed. How do I know?

I said I wouldn't go back through the other updates but....those of you who are part of "THIS" family...that read this update every week...are part of a great extended family of support that today is more generous than ever to those of us that serve. I'll probably never see those people in Dallas-Fort Worth Airport ever again for the rest of my life...but I will never forget them welcoming us home. I have never met the Yellow Ribbon Girls from Pennsylvania but I know their hearts. Every month a package arrives with everything from cookies, to snacks, letters, hand crafted pens, artwork from school children, and just for me...the Beaver County Times sports section! I am thankful I live in a country where even if you hate everything about conflict and war you can still find it in your heart to love those who gladly volunteer and serve. Emma Sky, General Odierno's political advisor, a Britain, and a self-admitting "Tree Hugger", said "America has an Army which it sometimes doesn't deserve." Perhaps Emma, but maybe if you traveled throughout the United States and met more ordinary Americans and not just our politicians, you would think otherwise. The American people deserve the very best and thankfully that's exactly what they have.

Finally, sometimes when we think everything around us is getting a little ugly in life.....take a little of that faith, pile your family into a car (we'll make an exception for the Kreers and allow Harleys!!) and go for a ride. [If you don't see something on the following list...add in your own...there are a lot of you who are world travelers and you know your favorites!] Is there anything more beautiful than a harvester going through a wheat field during late summer/early fall on the great open plains of the Midwest at sunset? Or if you don't like that version...how about sunset on Siesta Key, Florida or at Point Loma or Laguna Beach, California? Go drive the Blue Ridge Parkway on a glorious Fall morning as the mist sits in the valleys as the sun rises. Check with Jack Tassie first, but go up to Vermont in the summer and enjoy the serenity of Joe's Pond...no cars..no planes.. just peace. Take a kayak (had to work that in Jane ☺) and go out to Lake Mead, Nevada and find your way into a narrow box canyon and watch the Big Horn sheep graze. Drive into Yosemite National Park and through the Wawona tunnel and be prepared to see the most amazing (and supposedly most photographed) landscape in America with views of the Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, Bridalveil Falls, and the Half Dome. Sit with your family on a park bench overlooking the City of Salzburg, Austria in the late afternoon. Have lunch with your family outside on the main walking street of Fussen, Germany, looking up at the old Abbey and the Alps. Stand on the first tee box of Luffness on a Sunny morning (I suppose there are more than a few ☺) and anticipate the beauty of a Scottish links course. Walk to the Hollist Arms on a summer day and sit in the back garden for a good meal and enjoy the view of Snapelands from the crest of the hill as you walk home. Go sit on a winter's day and watch the American Bald Eagles hunting along the Illinois River. Go to any small town in America on the Fourth of July and take in their parade. Wait for a heavy snow fall and then go visit the Grotto on the campus of University of Notre Dame or if it is snowing in Washington D.C. go to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and listen to the silence other than the sound of each footstep the guard strikes. Sit on the balcony of an Eastern Shore summer home watching the waves roll in....Outer Banks...Hilton Head...take your pick. Hike Red Rock Canyon just outside of Las Vegas and take in the entire city from the top of the mountain. Go to Mount Washington at any time of year and experience one of the most stunning views of any major city in the United States. At the chance of giving Pittsburgh just a little too much exposure....have someone drive you through the Fort Pitt tunnel going into the city on a sunny day and for those of us who grew up there...I doubt if anything could say "Welcome Back" any better. If you've been too busy to appreciate just one of these...it's time....we have much to be thankful for.

In 2003 there was a song in the charts by a group called Lone Star called, "I'm Already There" At this time of year, I'll play that song and know how true those lyrics are.

As you sit around the Thanksgiving table this Thursday with your family and give thanks, know that we who are serving around the world are thankful for all that we have and join you in spirit and faith...after all...every one of us is already there.

Happy Thanksgiving! Take care....Matt