

WHY I CARE ABOUT OUR VETERANS

Ellen F.T. Yee, MD, MPH

Staff Physician

Medicine Service

505-265-1711 x4255

505-540-2042 (pager)

One beautiful morning, I watched the mass ascension at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. The balloons lifted off, capturing imaginations and creating excitement. It was spectacular. The crowds cheered and clapped as dreams and hopes floated up, uniting spectators who had come from all parts of the world. I sent up my wishes for a safe journey and return for all, along with other quiet thoughts. The balloons flew away, drifting into the distance until they were no longer visible. On another beautiful morning I flew, not on a balloon, but on a commercial flight where I sat next to a young man in uniform. I was struck by his polite manner, sincerity, and brilliant smile. He was heading to Iraq for his first tour. He confessed that he had butterflies in his stomach, but his wife, who was also in the service and already in Iraq, had helped him to anticipate what to expect. I thanked him for his service and he replied that he was honored to serve his country. At the end of the flight, I wished him a safe journey. Silently, I hoped that he and all of the other servicemen and women would return home whole and sound.

As a VA physician, I am humbled and rewarded by my 18 years of experience caring for our veterans. Sometimes they come back mentally and/or physically wounded and I wonder how best to help. I may not always have the answer, but I am here for them. Veterans give us opportunities in today's world and allow us to believe in the future. Their sacrifice and valor unite us by giving us the freedom we enjoy in this country. They are our mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. They separated from their families to serve, enabling us to stay with ours.

All veterans have a story to tell, but one really left an impression with me. In 1942, a young man shipped out on the SS America to begin his service in World War II as an army surgeon. To pass the time on the seas, he played cards (using medications as poker chips) and thought about his desire to help others as a doctor. After a four year tour in the Pacific theater, he returned home when the war ended to finish his training and raise a family. He encouraged his children to pursue their dreams and gave the following advice: "work hard, play hard." He wanted his children and others to have "a better life." At age 96, my father, the army surgeon, still radiates the honor and humor of yesteryear. At times, I may have played harder than I worked, but thanks to my father and all veterans, I had the opportunity to become a doctor as well. When the balloons ascend at the next Fiesta, I will send up my wishes and heartfelt gratitude to our veterans. Thank you for enabling the dreams of one generation to continue to the next.