

A NEW SET OF EYES: A NEW VISION FOR THE ASSOCIATION

My name is Michael Cunningham and I am running for Secretary of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Association.

Upon attending the last reunion in Oklahoma City, it became immediately apparent how little my generation is involved with the association, and much worse, how very little relationships my generation actually has with those who came before us. One example of not being connected with each other that I can immediately think about is Restrepo's funeral. The majority of my friends, who were friends with him as well, were not aware of what the Association had done for his funeral in Bogotá, Colombia; which was pretty sad considering the feelings that we all carried with us from being under the impression that no one was there for him, and that nobody did anything. This all changed for me personally when I had a conversation with one of the board members of the Association Foundation the conversation was precisely what made me want to attend the reunion.

I noticed a strange phenomenon while traveling to the reunion itself. I was blown away at how many people I knew that were nervous to see other people we all

knew. I realized in that moment that even with the pervasiveness of social media that we were still very disconnected from each other, even in the same generation or even the same deployment. People were worried that people they knew from back in the unit may not understand how desperately some of us were trying to live better lives. When we got to the reunion, old habits came out, in the form of beers and ruckus, but one thing was clear, we were all actually trying to be better people. Another thing that I wasn't aware of was how much those who came before us actually wanted to get to know us, it was quite humbling. Here were the men from all the famous Vietnam battles seeking us out? I felt a mixture of both shame and guilt, as it should have been us seeking them out.

Telling war stories amongst those you served with is a little like going and seeing a movie with someone, and then telling them about the same scenes they saw. Telling war stories with those who came before you in the same unit as you, is not only rewarding, but enlightening. It isn't until then that you understand the full story of your unit, and your service. Jim Channon was the first person in the

173rd with whom I got to do that. To be able to actually talk to the man whose drawings occupied the hallways and war room of our 2nd battalion headquarters was surreal. Connecting with Jim taught me more about myself than I could have ever imagined. It made a part of me feel so complete.

I started my particular story with the unit in Battle company. It wasn't written in stone that I would wind up in the 173rd. Truthfully, I didn't even know what it was until I "googled" the information on my orders. Without the internet, I probably wouldn't have had a clue where I was going until I got there. I served two deployments to Afghanistan with the 173rd, the first one being 15 months in the Korengal Valley. I managed to make squad leader and the rank of sergeant, which probably surprised a lot of people, including myself. I am humbled and honored to have been raised as a soldier amongst the Army's truly greatest fighting force. We Sky Soldiers are the best BANG for your taxpayer buck in the Army, no doubt there.

Unfortunately, the combination of being young, having decent money, and deploying caused me to make some decisions that weren't the best for myself,

like getting married to the wrong person. Fast forward to the end of my time in the Army and I was getting a divorce in the same week I was getting out of the Army. Not only was everything completely different in a week, but I was still on the hook for all these self-elected responsibilities I thought would make my marriage work, such as a house and nice car for my then wife and her son. The net effect of this resulted in becoming homeless. Having nothing to be able to fill my time with, it pushed me to figure out what I could do on my own.

The time that I spent in the Army and the experiences on deployment left me with two life imperatives; to do anything I could to rid the veteran community and our communities at home of struggle, and the second was to end the ongoing conflicts around the world. As it was in Jim Channon's field manual (made famous by the movie "Men Who Stare at Goats") that said very clearly; "If the world wants peace it is going to have to ask the soldiers to give it to them, because if the soldiers don't fight, who will?" Seems such a simple concept to say, but the practice becomes a lesson in what hurdles are really in the way of peace for us all in this world. The decision to push out on my own in combination with what I had learned from studying Channon's work and associated concepts led to the formation of a nonprofit called Warrior Circle. Warrior Circle was meant to answer the struggles in both our fellow veterans lives and the communities they lived in. What came after that unfortunately was a lesson in how nonprofits should not be run. Trying to find the positives in everything always, I am grateful for the experience because

lessons from my mistakes in that process contributed directly to the success of the organizations I would be in charge of in the future.

At the same time, everything was going on with that organization another major event was racing toward me in my post Army life, Iraq. Warrior Circle was meant to combat struggles our fellow Veterans were having and to propel them forward in their community as an effective and humble agent of change for the better. What took place with Iraq wasn't really supposed to happen until five years down the line from the time of forming Warrior Circle. Life has a funny way of changing your plans for you like that. Needless to say, it was another foray into yet another adventure I might have been a little unprepared for. We went over and helped the Assyrian Christians form their own defense unit to protect their homes against ISIS. While we weren't as successful as I would have liked us to be, I am pleased to say they are a fully legitimate unit with their own base and are contributing greatly to the attrition of the so called Islamic State.

Coming back from this 84-day adventure left me in a weird place. Mostly because I wasn't really sure how to move forward. It wasn't until leaving Texas and returning to my actual home that I would find out what was next. All of the lessons from both Iraq and Warrior Circle would end up directly contributing to a tidal wave of success in my home state of Maine. It took roughly a year of reacquainting myself with my home, but when the time was right, the answer fell into my life in the form of an incumbent candidate seeking re-election in October

2016. The State Senate President, Mike Thibodeau, came by my house with the usual campaign lines. I told him that I was just going to ask questions and if he could answer even one, he'd be doing much better than his opponent. I asked about what he was doing to combat the out of control opioid epidemic in our state. He provided a pretty good answer, but I told him I wasn't sure that would be enough. Upon hearing that he asked me what I would do instead. We got to talking and he liked what he heard so much, he offered me a job. I asked him instead if he would give that job to the young man who lived next door and let me volunteer. Little did I know how much this man and his offer would change my life for the better.

By November, we got him re-elected. Upon getting him re-elected I was offered employment as chamber staff in the Maine Senate. Then in January, I was elected to vice chair of my county's Republican committee. Then in the beginning of March I was elected to my town's planning board. In April, I was elected to my local American Legion as director of Americanism. Then in May, the chair of the Republican committee in my county resigned and I was voted in as the Chair of the local GOP. Also, after years of being away from Warrior Circle, I'm happy to say I am back and in the process of bringing it back to life and beyond.

Throughout all of my recent endeavors in politics and various local service organizations I began to notice a startling trend, the inability to foster intra-generational bonding. You hear it from either generation all of the time.

The older generations say they don't understand why the younger generation won't take initiative and get involved, often questioning whether or not the idea of service is even something that resonates with the youth. The younger generation wonders to themselves why the older generations are so out of touch. When the reality of the situation is that neither are really reaching out to each other. Sooner or later certain individuals on whatever side of the imaginary age divide decide to reach out to each other. I guess I became one of those ambassadors by accident. I learned that all that was necessary was to simply reach out, and ask how the people in charge are doing personally and how they see things in the organization going. I learned the key to all of this is to not burst into the organization demanding to take charge and changing everything because no one supposedly knows what they are doing. That kind of thing could not be further from the truth. Chances are the people in charge know exactly what they are doing but have long since fatigued themselves trying to continually do it. It's kind of like deploying someone for 40 years straight and then wondering why they aren't as good at it after doing it for 40 years. People aren't static beings and yet we treat them as such when they are in leadership positions. People's lives experience all sorts of change — family loss, sickness, financial hardship — the list goes on and on. To assume that leadership is immune to this is pretending the world is like you'd like it to be, rather than accepting it for what it is. All of the organizations that you can think of in your life are currently

experiencing this dilemma.

My goal is simple in three parts; strengthening the intra-generational bond between Sky Soldiers, organizational stability and full spectrum service. Strengthening the bond between generations is probably the easiest and most fun. The older generation usually feels younger throughout the process, and the younger generation ends up feeling a little wiser throughout the process. All that it really takes is just setting an example for others to see.

Organizational stability falls pretty hard on a secretary's shoulders. Being secretary of an organization means that in addition to providing minutes for every meeting, you also notify everyone of practically everything. The real work though, is making sure every member knows how to be a member in the organization. This means finding ways to familiarize your members with the rules laid out in the bylaws as well as the rules of order in state where the organization is registered. I would make short instructional pieces for members on how Roberts Rules works and how to apply them in our organizations and meetings. By doing this, every member would immediately feel a sense of ownership and the ability to make a real impact in the organization.

Service was the cornerstone of our lives in the 173rd and there is no reason why it shouldn't be in the unit's association. The four major things impacting Veterans right now is PTSD, lack of purpose, lack of a brotherhood, and the inability to transition. One of the major problems with PTSD is that there isn't a real explanation for what we Sky Soldiers truly experience with it. There are neurological

processes and concepts that adequately and thoroughly explain what we are going through and why we react or do what we do. A sense of purpose can easily be brought back to a Veteran's life by volunteering. All the chapters we have provide an excellent avenue for apply ourselves towards the communities in our respective states. The chapters also exist to keep the brotherhood together, but it's the sense of fulfillment from volunteering together and strengthening intra-generational bonds that strengthens that brotherhood. Transition into your communities from service will fall into place with the other three items addressed. If a Veteran understands what is happening to them with PTSD, is able to volunteer with their fellow Veterans, the community picks up on the utility of the Veteran and often tries to return the favor by offering employment.

We may be at a crossroads but the task is easier than we think. It is time to come together and put to work our skills and experience to better the communities around us and the relationships that matter to us. I am truly humbled in having the chance to run for this position. Whether elected or not I believe the campaign will be a great thing for the 173rd association as we will be inspiring many 2nd generation Sky Soldiers to join the organization in order to vote. I am beyond thankful for my time in the 173rd and even more grateful for the amazing people I am able to call friends because of that time.

“Real soldiers fall from the Sky!”
Airborne, All the way, SKY SOLDIERS!

-Michael Cunningham