



Sometimes People Just Don't Know

Story and Photos by Teresa K. Howes

He pours a half-a-cup of pure white sugar into his pure black coffee. “Wow, are you drinking a little coffee with your sugar?” I jest, AND, secretly internalize my gasp as the stream of sugar flows into his cup. We stand at the coffee-fixer-upper-space in the North Anchorage, Alaska, coffee shop. Some soldiers enjoy standing in coffee-fixer-upper-spaces. Clearly, the coffee is the delivery system for the snow-white crystals. Stirring sugar into the coffee gives us a chance to take in the room and visit with ease. Some might know it as hypervigilance especially if there is no wall to place our back against.

My Viet Nam, U.S. Army, retired, first sergeant-PTS (Post Traumatic Stress)-mentor

precisely selects a table in the shop. He pulls out the chair to sit.

“How’s this?” he states both in a question and a directive. He sweeps his arm as his fingers point and pause, much like an airline attendant, at the door, windows, and mountains, indicating we can take in all avenues of approach.

“This is perfect,” I say while pulling out my own chair. “I can see you, the masses, and the mountains.” Relief floods my brain that he picked the spot to download his mentoring. Decision-making of this sort tends to strain me. We both sit and observe people walk rhythmically in and out of the coffee shop. The perfect place to sit is part of a self-preservation safety plan to save the place if anything odd

should occur—not that it would, but one never knows. Plus, keeping our eyes peeled and on the door is a strategy to placate injured senses. Most people are unaware that PTS places demands on its host to constantly seek safety, hence an energy drain

It is cold outside. Little hoar frost crystals sparkle in the sun. These miniature elfin Jack and Jill Frosts grew overnight. They stand an inch tall on surfaces like the steel rack with mountain bikes attached to big fat snow tires. The elfin frost is an iridescent color like Bill’s kind shimmering vocal tones. I prepare to listen and take notes as he offers tools to support me the rest of my life.

To continue reading *SOMETIMES PEOPLE JUST DON'T KNOW* by Teresa K. Howes, pages 2-3, use the QRC Code



For an hour or so he fills my half empty coffee cup to full with wisdom.

“What do you want to cover today, Ma’aaaaam?” He says this with bit of a Bostonian-Texas drawl and giggles. He’s the only person who can get away with giggling—retired first sergeants are allowed to jab using special intonation at retired captains like me. A first sergeant and God are one most of the time in the military I grew up in. When the first sergeant speaks, even E.F. Hutton listens.

“Welllllll, TOP,” I respectfully jab at him. Curtly acknowledging his position in the chain-of-command. The slang term for a first sergeant is “TOP,” as she or he are at the top of enlisted food chain in a troop, battery, or company-sized unit. The slang term for a company commander usually a captain, is “THE OLD MAN,” or the person who plans and cares for the unit. I served as a unit commander and prefer “THE OLD MAN” versus “THE OLD WOMAN!” Either, though, are words of respect that

definitely humble and honor me. We both admire the big-shot-ism in the other. My thimble full of experience as compared to my good friend and military brother is miniscule. Yet, he treats me as an equal in my war time and military experience.

“I needed to present someone with a triple eye-gauge the other day,” I recall. A triple eye gauge is my shot at humor to quell my frustration. In hand to hand combat it is referred to as the double eye gauge. You jab your thumbs into the enemy’s eyeballs with everything you got in the event a weapon is unavailable. It is all out fighting like a girl and very effective. “I showed to an appointment with a care provider the other day for this painful skin rash,” I explain, pointing to my back covered with a cotton t-shirt and then a loose-fitting flannel shirt—I thank God no one can see my skin. “The receptionist called me to the window and asked for my husband’s military ID.”

“UH OH!” Exclaims my silver-haired, silver-tongued friend. “Did you take a deep breath?” he asks.

“In fact, I did. And, I exhaled it in one cool breeze to frost her eyelashes as I informed her that I served as the military member.” I continue with a half-smile. “Don’t they know who I am?” Aghast, I look at this kind friend who doesn’t call me on my bragging. His sweetness is showing up from the legal white crystals entering his gut from his cup of joe. I realize my ego just spoke and I backtrack: “How could she know who I am, I don’t even know who I am anymore. Plus, she didn’t even ask.”

I further my rant with my 70-something coffee buddy who totally gets it, yet doesn’t because he is not a 50-something female, “Twenty-one years of military service and these people continue to recognize me, the woman, as one who didn’t pound the ground—which I did with a ruck sack on my back half my weight—and matching head gear, uniform, and boots. I looked better than a Ninja Turtle. No man I know, EVER, receives the question: can I see your wife’s military ID?”

“HAAAAAAAAA HAAAAAAAAA,” my friend splits a gut laughing hard. I’m afraid all of that sugar is gonna leak out and he’ll task me to replace it.

Suddenly, this man sitting in front of me stops laughing and morphs into the Winter Warlock from the Christmas special *Santa Claus is Comin to Town*. His eyes see into a distance not in view for me. He went somewhere in his memory bank. He retrieves it and prepares to verbalize a life lesson for me—something good combat arms retired first sergeants can do in a flash.

“Sometimes, people just don’t know . . .” he says and drifts into his storytelling trance. “Once a car cut me off in traffic,” he said. “I wanted to throat punch the driver. I tailed the driver for fifty miles I was so out of my head. From Anchorage, up the Turnagain Arm to the turn off for Girdwood.”

I nervously glance around the coffee shop. I hope his icy voice that echoes combat stress falls upon few ears. I look out the window at the Alaskan Mountains of Chugach State Park. They rise

high into the blue telling their own tales of people who wander into them and sometimes don't come out because "they just don't know . . ." Right now, I want to escape the intensity of his coolness and run into those mountains that I don't know. His intensity feeds the allegiance to the fact that I need to own and make amends about my own throat punching. These internalized reactions are toward crazy drivers, receptionists . . . anyone who might get something wrong. Once, anger welled up in me at a receptionist who wouldn't return my ID. I reached through the security window and snatched it out of her hand—I turned myself into my counselor who informed me that "snatching" could be misunderstood as assault.

I interrupt my friend who now is in a froth like foam on a cappuccino. "Didn't they know who you were?" I ask. I want to get a laugh to break the ice forming on my coffee from his stare.

Excitedly, he says, through rising vocals and waving hands, "Sometimes I'd drive up on the bumper, sometimes I back clear off."

"Didn't the driver see you?" I query.

"Not a clue." He growls using a few f-bombs. "All I see is red, angry road rage for miles. And I followed them in all my rage fifty miles waiting for them to turn. Finally, they hooked a left and parked. I parked near them. They got out, didn't even look around—it dawned on me that there is no way they saw me fifty miles back. That is when I realized that sometimes people just don't know. And that guy sure as heck didn't know I am a Veteran. Sometimes you just got to embrace the suck ma'am and realize people just don't know, which includes you and I," he said with a warm grin, melting the icicles that accumulated around me. We sit quietly for a moment and consider what we don't know, holding our coffee cups now lighter. Our brains receive the message from our bladders: "I gotta use the latrine." Or in civilian terms: the toilet.

At first, I didn't get his story. I didn't get how people cut him off in traffic and didn't know he tailed them for 50 miles. I thought about all of experiences he's worked through the suck of serving in a hideous conflict and people not knowing how to honor

his service. It all came to me one day as I pondered what he'd poured in my coffee cup: to honor him with action.

Several months later I take the initiative and force my brain to embrace the suck and acknowledge that the receptionist I'm standing in front of doesn't know as she requests my husband's military ID. I warmly explain to her about my 21-year military service. I turn it into brief show and tell (similar to the show-and-tells in kindergarten) about my well-earned military ID and that my husband possesses a dependent ID that states SP for SPOUSE and a clear ID expiration date. Mine says CPT for the retired rank of CAPTAIN, the word INDEF for INDEFINITE under expiration date, and the words U.S. ARMY RESERVE RETIRED at the top. She pauses, clearly intrigued by such a disclosure. I thank her profusely for listening, scheduling, writing, solution finding and safekeeping patients' information.

We smile.

We thank one another for serving . . . that is what civil people do when they precisely and presently know what just a moment ago they didn't know.

