

A casket, a dead soldier and a lament from a war long ago (Opinion)

Flag draped caskets of American soldiers during the war in Vietnam

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By [Charles J. Dean | cdean@al.com](#)

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On July 29, 1969 Montgomery reporter and columnist Joe Azbell was at the capital city's train station when he noticed a casket on a cart.

Joe Azbell *Charles J. Dean | [cdean@al.com](#)*

Being a reporter his curiosity I suppose got the better of him and he asked a porter about it. The porter responded telling Azbell that it was a soldier who didn't make it back from Vietnam alive.

The sight of that casket moved Azbell to write the column below. It's a poignant column written about one dead soldier and the times in which he lived and died. Azbell didn't know the soldier.

Azbell's column is not only a belated tribute to the dead man in the casket but a tribute to all soldiers who were dying then in a war that most of the American public had turned against by 1969, including some in the country who unfortunately also turned against the men who fought the war.

Azbell's son, David, sent the column to me last week. David said the column had been read on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. David said newscaster Paul Harvey called the column powerful.

And indeed I think it is. It reflects its time. I'm happy to present it here on this Memorial Day.

By Joe Azbell

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- You're back home.

Here on a railway platform.

I didn't say, "thank you, soldier."

I'm sorry, fellow.

I should have.

No excuses.

Maybe I can make up for it a little now.

Maybe you will understand.

I know you never expected to come home in this casket box.

All alone. Here on a cart on a railway platform with all the hissing brakes and steaming engines and clanging noises and people passing.

None of the people know who you are.

That you died for them.

I wouldn't have known myself. A porter told me. He said it like a bulletin: "He's one who didn't make it." He explained with one word: "Vietnam."

I never saw your face. I didn't know you. Or maybe I did. You were young. All your life in front of you. Full of plans and ideas. A whole world to conquer. All kinds of dreams of fun, excitement, and joys you will never know.

All that is left is the lifeless shot up corpse in this casket box.

And I didn't say "thank you."

And I'm sorry.

Your mother and father raised you and loved you and took care of you when you were hurt and did the best they could by you and never intended that you die 12,000 miles from home shot to pieces by a Viet Cong.

And that young girl you married and with whom you hunted second-hand furniture and installment payment appliances to outfit a little apartment and the baby whose picture you carried but whose chubby little hands you never touched or loving smile you never knew - they'll miss you too.

And I didn't say "thank you."

And I'm sorry.

Your mother didn't believe the telegram. A mother never does. Any minute now she thinks you'll walk in the door and throw your big arms around her and say, "Hi, Mom." But you won't. Never again.

Your wife and baby will know you are gone most. A young girl in an apartment with a job to make ends meet and a baby left with a maid. A girl too young to be a widow. A baby boy who should have a father to teach him to fish and box and to pin to the floor and look up to. Your wife will re-read your letters and touch the gifts you sent her and re-read your letters again.

The government will send her your medals. She'll frame them and put them up on a wall. But they will be little comfort on lonely nights when she'll remember all about how it could have been if the bullet from a sniper's rifle of a yellow skinned man in black pajamas hadn't hit you.

People will keep reminding her. It will tear at her. Certainly she's proud of what you did. But it hurts. She is like you, fellow. She doesn't really understand why you had to die in a little sweat hole of a jungle country 12,000 miles from home. She keeps saying to herself, "Why?" and holds your baby close to her.

You didn't understand, either. Not really. They said it was for freedom and liberty and to preserve America and it was hard to understand. You went with a lot of courage and a lot of fear and a lot of doubt about what it was all about. But you went there where you didn't understand the language or the people or the war. You went because they said you were needed. And you came back in a casket box.

And I didn't say "thank you."

And I'm sorry.

I probably saw you on the street. Or a thousand others like you.

Soldiers. Men in uniform. You figure "so they're soldiers."

In World War II, you would have been a hero in a military outfit to everybody.

People would have stopped you on the street, slapped you on the back, and said, "give 'em hell, buddy."

They would have let you know you were doing something for your country and them. But not today.

Today there are too many like me.

We see a uniform and we don't ask a soldier if we can do anything for him. We don't say a word.

There's no Sunday dinner for the boy away from home. No free phone calls home. No pat on the back.

There's no picking up the meal check to let the boy know somebody cares and appreciates.

There's no signs in the windows that say "We're proud of you" or flags waving or parades or people seeing soldiers off.

You go away unheralded and some of you come back in a casket box. And the funeral crowd is small and the service is brief.

And yet you go. You go with a brave face and a tight heart and fight in the most fearsome war in the history of our country 12,000 miles away.

We never say "thank you."

Not me. Not anybody else.

It's like we expect you to die for us without a word of appreciation.

It's wrong. I'm sorry. I'm one of them.

And how bravely you fight. How bravely you live. Just being in that jungle country with a strange language and a strange people where the next second could end your life with a booby trap or a mine or a sniper's bullet takes guts.

Sure you're the young generation, but there's no generation gap when it comes to your guts and loyalty.

When others are trying to burn America down with a torch in the streets, you are trying to keep our Communist enemies from burning America down by fighting them in Vietnam.

And I never said "thank you."

And I'm sorry.

I know you didn't understand all the headlines. Assassinations. Riots. College kids' protests. Demands to the college board. I know how you felt.

You read about college kids protesting and said to yourself, "Boy have they got gripes. They ought to be over here. They ought to wake up in a jungle camp in steaming heat not knowing if a bullet from a tree sniper will get you before you get coffee. They ought to be here where your every step could explode a hidden mine. Then they'd have something to protest about."

And you shook your head and threw down the paper from home and laughed at the bums on campus with their phony protests. Then you picked up a rifle and went on patrol and never knew if you would get back.

You didn't protest.

You didn't make up a list of demands you wanted "or else."

You went into battle for your country. You never really understood what it was all about. But you didn't protest.

And I never said "thank you."

And I'm sorry.

And when you read about people burning down cities and rioting and killing people you wondered if it was all worth your being over there.

Maybe you talked about it. Maybe you wondered about it. But you picked up your rifle and did your job anyway. Why? Because you loved this land, your home. You loved freedom.

You loved the right to worship God and own a mortgaged home of your own and say your piece about things and work hard to get ahead and to raise your family decently.

And I never said "thank you."

And I'm sorry.

Now you're home. You came home in this casket box. They draped a flag over your casket.

There'll be a little notice in the newspaper about a funeral.

But there will be too many like me.

They'll read the newspaper notice and it will be a statistic. They'll read it and say, "It's a stinking war." Then they'll finish their morning coffee and go to work and forget about it until they read another statistic. Then they'll say again, "It's a stinking war." And forget to attend the funeral. Too much trouble.

You can't hear me now, soldier.

You are dead. Killed. Gone.

You won't see your loved ones ever again.

A bullet voided your sweet taste of life on earth.

The clock stopped forever.

You can't hear me now in this casket box.

You can't hear me say "thank you."

But I'm going to say it anyway.

Maybe somehow you'll know.

Thank you for dying for my freedoms.

Thank you for dying for my country.

Thank you for dying for my children.

Thank you for dying for my rights.

Thank you for dying for me.

I'm sorry I didn't say "thank you" sooner.

I should have.

Everybody should have.

