

Restoring Belief of the American People

It was a fine Sunny day in Pensacola when I arrived at the airport. The traffic wasn't too bad and the line to check in was just right. I thought "Today is a good Day." and I waved goodbye to my friends who had come down to see me off. My friend Sierra had been the one who had drove me to the airport, while my friend shultz snagged a taxi as soon as he heard I was headed on my way out. He showed up and said "Goodbye for now friend" and we exchanged hugs and blessings. Now I was all ready to get on my way back home. I reluctantly turned away from those I have know to be my family for the past 9 months and I headed through the sliding doors and up the escalator. I did not know if I would ever see the two of my friends again, but I knew I would always have the memories that we all shared together. Maybe one day we will meet up again I told myself. 11:30 rolled around and they call for pre-boarding of the plane so I stand up and get ready for my aisle to be called. "Section 9 please board the plane now" the stewardess said. Almost there I had thought in the recesses of my mind. A few more sections were called off to board and then I heard her say, " We will be boarding all passengers seating in section 6. Please board the plane now." That's me!, so I stepped into the line, scanned my ticket, and then stored my luggage knowing that I was almost home. This was the very beginning of a day I will never be able to forget.

My ears began to dampen the sound around me as the plane was being taxi'd to the runway. My stomach began to turn a little as the G-force hit me once the landing gear left the asphalt behind. We were airborne now and I soon fell asleep to ensure I would be ready for what was waiting for me at home, My family and friends. "make sure your tables are in the upright and locked position. We should be on the ground in Memphis in a few minutes." I heard as I woke up drowsily to some turbulence. Before I knew it the landing gear touched down and we were coming up on the gate. When I stepped off of the Plane the People all around me were shaking my hand and saying things like, " Thank you for what you are doing for us.", "Thank you for defending our nation", "I cannot express enough my gratitude toward the Military and how much you guys do for this nation." I didn't know what to say and I was completely Speechless. I have never had so many people, strangers at that, show so much pride and Love for someone that they had never met. I felt like I was worth a million dollars, like nothing could ruin my mood I was in at all. I continued on my way, still shocked with amazement and never been prouder of myself, to Gate 6A for my next flight. I stopped in at a small restaurant in between terminals A and B and I had a smoke and an order of fries.

It was in this very restaurant that I had lunch with a person I had never met before. We sat and talked about everything under the sun and shared memories and stories of our very own lives. It seemed strange to me at the time because here I was sitting and talking to someone while telling him my life story and I had met him just a few minutes before. As strange as it may have felt, it also felt very normal to me. We talked for about an hour and then we parted our ways. Me back to California, to my home, my family, and friends, and Him to Minnesota to see a Football Game. So I gathered my things, paid my check, and I headed off down the hallways of the terminal gates looking for my last leg back home.

D6 to Los Angeles International. This was where I needed to be and so I went to go sit down and I only waited about 5 minutes before the pre-boarding call was made. I kept wondering who my neighbors on the plane would be and what kinda people they might be like. So out came my ticket, it was scanned and the Flight Attendant Told me to have a wonderful trip home and welcome back. At the time I was feeling a little guilty because I had not really gone anywhere. I had been in training the entire time. But it was later on that I realized it didn't matter what I had done, it was what I stood for. A fighter defending the freedoms that make our country the best place to live in the world, The United States of America.

I boarded the actual plane and everyone was telling me congratulations and welcome home. Things like thank you and god bless you and our country. I was awe struck at the praise I was receiving from complete strangers. I could not believe the love and admiration for everyone on that plane. 26 A was my seat, a window seat which pleased me very much. I sat down and soon enough my neighbor for the time being made his place next to me. We introduced ourselves and began to converse with one another. He was a very nice man. He was african American and he was on his way home from a long buisness trip and was just as excited to almost be home as I was. His name was William. When the compressed oxygen began to roll into the cabin before take-off my mind began to slow down and before I knew it I was fast asleep with my head on the window. Comfortable with dreams of my loving family and friends waiting for me back at home, excited as ever.

"Excuse me Sir" I heard the stewardess say as my mind was still a little fuzzy from my rest. "Excuse me Sir, I hate to have woken you up but could you please come up to the front of the plane with me and bring all of your stuff please?" I was confused, but I nodded in agreement. DId I do something wrong? Was I getting parachuted out of the plane for something? these were the rediculous thoughts in my head at that point and time. As we neared the fron of the plane I stepped into a little alcove so i was out of the way of movement and waited for the words that came next.

"There is a gentleman who wishes to remain anonymous sitting in first class who would like for you to have his seat. He told me that he is very proud of what you are doing for our country and he thinks that you deserve a little bit of comfort."

What?! Did she say what I thought she said? Me in first class? But who is this Mystery Man? Who made this extremely kind Gesture, and then I saw someone in first class begin to pack up their things. The stewardess called him over and that is when I found out that he was 24 years Retired from the Navy himself. He was once what I am now. I was once again awe struck. His name was David. This is one person whom I will not be able to forget for as long as I live because of the impact he made on my still young and impressionable mind that very day. We talked for a few minutes sharing some of our lives with one another, and then he told me to have his seat. I refused and told him that I really do appreciate the offer but he paid a lot of money for that seat and I can just sit back in my seat. That is when he asked the stewardess where I was sitting, went back to my seat in coach and set his stuff down and then came back up front to me. "now you don't have a choice. This is a gift from me to you for the dedicated work and time you are giving to our country in our time of need. You have my fullest respect and Love Shipmate." I came to the verge of tears as I heard some of the most beautiful words said at that moment. Me? I am that important? But I am just one person...How? Why? Then I realized it was the image, the perception, and what I stood for. I was very important. I felt very important at that moment.

So this is the part where I sat down in my seat. I had some lunch and I had not realized until about 15 minutes later that the rest of the people in First Class were looking at me. Once again I thought, Oh No! What did I do Now? THe passengers around me were all Los Angeles Firefighters who had just returned from 2 months helping with the Hurricane Katrina Relief. We sat there and we shared stories about everything and about the fact that I had gone through Kartina at my school. We thanked eachother for everything we had done for everyone and began to laugh and joke around. "Prepare for Landing" came over the intercom throughout the cabin and following the next few minutes of relative quiet you could feel the rubber touch down on the Hot Tar strip. We were all home. I was gathering my things to exit the plane when I heard the Stewardess come on over the intercom system.

" Ladies and Gentleman I would like to take a minute to thank some special passengers on board this very flight. I would like to say that you to all the LA Firefighters onboard with us today for all their hard work and dedication and all the help that they have given to those who were affected by Hurricane Katrina. I would also Like to thatnk a very special person today. His Name Is Jeffrey and he is in the United States Navy. He is headed home and has not seen anyone for over 9 months and I would like to thank them all and let them know that we appreciate them more than words can say."

The cabin exploded in applause and hoot calls. People were giving each other hugs and pats on the back and it seemed like it was a party on board. I was actually blushing a little bit. So after the excitement that ensued began to calm down we all exited the plane and I waited after I passed through the gate for David. I wanted to tell him thank you again for everything he had done for me. As the passengers unloaded and passed through the gate on their way to their final destination, they patted me on the back and we exchanged hugs and heartfelt comments and compliments. Then David came through the gate with a huge smile on his face. "I know exactly how you must be feeling right now. Incredible isn't it? Restores your belief in the American people." We exchanged hugs and proceeded to head down the hallways talking about things all over again. When I reached my escalator I told David to take care and thank you again.

The wall that was blocking my view soon began to seem as if it was raising up. Then I saw them. The most beautiful sight I had seen since I had left home. My parents were there at the bottom waiting for me. They embraced me and we exchanged hugs and kisses and loving embraces. We headed to the baggage claim to get my luggage, and then we headed home. Finally...I was home.

- Jeffrey Michael Graham. CTRSN, USN -